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# PART ONE - Chapter 1: Wren

[image]

***a/n: i would like to preface this with the fact that this is a re-uploaded version of Dragonspeaker, which i originally posted under the account name of Silky_Sands. i am simply posting this under a new account name, mainly for account issues and wanting to move accounts instead of simply changing my name. as such, i'm re-uploading this story as i know it was liked by a fair amount of users on here and i want others to be able to read this fanfiction on Wattpad if that's what is preferred. i am currently rewriting certain chapters simply when i have the time - as of now, the plan is mainly for the first couple of chapters. there will likely be some changes in certain parts, but will generally follow the same plot (though most will be way longer than the original chapter, whoops). i apologise for those who were looking forwards to the next chapter of this fic and had to wait so long for it.***

***besides this, i would like to note something else as i know how shipping is in this fandom - some of the pairings in this are Wrenvy (Wren x Ivy - sort of? it's not explicitly romantic it's more of an alterous relationship since in here both are non-sam aros but yes it is Wrenvy content), Grovanberry (Grove x Rowan x Cranberry), Daffiolet (Daffodil x Violet), and Blark (Brook x Lark). ships that are mentioned in the books such as Leavy (Leaf x Ivy) and Wrendauntable (Wren x Undauntable) will be acknowledged as such in this fic, but they will remain platonic. if you aren't a fan of that, i'm sure there are other Dragonslayer sequel fics that have either ships in them that are romantic in nature - please don't get angry that i'm not going to write certain relationships in a way you may want.***

***and on a final note, please note that since the release of The Dangerous Gift, this story will not follow Wings of Fire's canon timeline and any stories following it will not either. so if that isn't your thing, i'd probably recommend looking elsewhere as i don't tend to follow canon after the second arc, anyhow.***

***without further ado, i hope you enjoy this fic that accidentally turned into a huge project that i grew to really love over time. or rereading it, if it isn't for the first time. whatever works.***

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**PART ONE**

**WREN**

Wren rubbed her eyes, blinking several times. She was greeted with a gentle ray of sunlight; presumably dawn. Glancing over her shoulder, she noticed Ivy and Leaf nearby, still asleep - she still found it odd to be travelling with other humans, after living alone with Sky for so long. It was odd in a nice sort of way, though - she was with humans she knew she could trust and genuinely liked. Sky had began to stir next to her, yawning a little.

Getting on her knees, she sat up, stretching. She'd been used to waking up early, usually rising with the sun - it was also useful for when she and Sky needed to leave so they could stay on the move. *I wonder how quickly Ivy and Leaf will get used to this,* She wondered. *I mean, maybe Leaf is an early riser nowadays but...*

Soon Sky was more or less awake, though he still seemed rather groggy. Wren smiled, albeit mainly to herself.

"Good morning, Sky," She greeted him, chuckling softly.

He grinned back. "Morning to you too." He glanced over in Leaf and Ivy's direction. "It's going to be so exciting travelling with more people!"

Wren gave him a smile, nodding. She wasn't entirely sure how she felt about traveling with others yet, but she was glad that Sky seemed to be enjoying it. She glanced over in the same direction, a smirk creeping onto her face. *Speaking of other people...those two must be late sleepers or something,* She concluded. *Nothing I can't fix.*

Sky seemed to notice her expression. "Wren?"

She glanced back, still grinning. "What?" She replied innocently.

"What are you planning? The look on your face practically gives you away."

Averting her gaze from his, she replied, "Just waking Ivy and Leaf up."

Sky frowned. "Well, be nice about it. I don't trust that expression."

Rolling her eyes, Wren walked over to Ivy, who was curled up against the grass, sleeping soundly. Crouching down, she lightly shook Ivy's shoulder.

"Come on, Ivy. Wake up," She murmured, still shaking her.

She seemed to be waking up, though Ivy was slow to rise - she reluctantly sat up, stretching and yawning as she did so. Wren could tell there were bags underneath her eyes, though not entirely noticeable - it did make Wren wonder just how much sleep Ivy actually managed to get last night. Before Wren could say anything else, Ivy seemed to nod off a little, almost falling on her back.

Ivy gave Wren a drowsy smile. "Oh...morning, Wren."

Wren almost let out a snort of amusement. "Morning to you, too. Did you manage to get enough sleep last night? You seem out of it."

"Oh? No, no. Don't worry about me, I'm fine," She replied, though it sounded more like a yawn in Wren's opinion.

*I doubt that,* She thought, but she didn't say it out loud - she had the feeling that Ivy wasn't going to answer that question any time soon. *Besides, she looks too tired to even pay attention.*

Wren lightly nudged her shoulder. "Maybe while we're travelling Sky will let you sleep on his back."

"That'd...that'd be great." Ivy yawned once more. She stretched her arms one last time before looking back at Wren. "So why do we need to be up so early, again?"

"I just want to be on the move as soon as possible. I don't want to waste daylight," Wren replied as matter-of-factly. Ivy just groaned

in response, rubbing the crust out of her eyes.

Sky came over to them, giving Ivy a cheerful grin. "Morning, Ivy!"

Ivy returned his gesture, albeit still tired. "Morning to you too." Now rubbing her other eye, she mumbled, "Sorry I'm not much of an early riser. I just find it difficult to wake up so early..."

"That's alright," Sky replied with a shrug of his shoulders. "I'm not much of an early riser either. Wren's the one who insists on waking up this early, anyways..."

Laughing, Wren nodded. "That's true! You've always been something of a slug in the morning."

Sky scoffed, rolling his eyes. "But you are the one who can never stay in one spot."

"What? No!"

Sky turned to Ivy, amused. "It's true, you know. One time when we just woke up she'd been so insistent on moving on that we skipped breakfast!"

"We got food afterwards!" Raising an eyebrow, she added, "And besides, if I hadn't gotten you to move, we'd have been staring at that snail for hours."

Sky chortled. "I can't help that snails are so adorable!"

Wren smiled. "I know you can't."

Ivy let out a giggle, taking Wren by surprise. Wren turned to face her, tilting her head.

"What's so funny?"

"Oh, I wasn't - your interactions with each other are adorable," Ivy remarked, still smiling. "It just makes me really excited that humans and dragons are able to get along! I'm so glad I get to travel with you guys! Agh, I can't wait to spread the word about dragon-human communication!"

Wren couldn't help but grin at her - while they hadn't talked as much as Wren would've liked to prior, she had always found Ivy's little outbursts of excitement adorable. It made her thrilled to find another human who loved dragons and understood that they were just as complex as they were, just like herself. *Well, and Rose,* She added mentally. *But the fact that Ivy's my age and also loves dragons like I do just makes me so happy.* Wren tried not to dwell on it often, though.

"So you weren't in it just because Leaf came with?" Wren joked, raising an eyebrow.

Ivy frowned, confused. "I don't get...oh. *Oh* ." She shook her head upon realising. "No, I just came with on my own accord. Even if he wasn't coming with, I'd still want to travel with you both."

Wren blinked in shock, though she could feel her cheeks flushing out of embarrassment. *Okay, maybe don't joke about her and Leaf next time, Wren,* She decided. *I wasn't expecting that for an answer, though. From what Leaf described, she seemed to like him back?*

*I might have to ask him about that later.*

"Wren? You alright?" She asked.

Wren was dragged out of her own thoughts. "Uh...yeah. It was a stupid joke, don't worry about it."

Ivy didn't look the slightest bit convinced, but shrugged. She instead turned to Leaf, lightly tapping his shoulder.

"Hey, Leaf, wake up," She murmured.

He woke up more willingly than Ivy had, though he still seemed somewhat tired. He gave Ivy a small smile, who returned it with a soft laugh. Leaf turned to Wren, blinking a few times.

"How long have you guys been waiting for me to wake up?"

Wren shrugged. "Not too long. I woke up Ivy awhile ago, but you didn't miss much, I promise."

This seemed to relieve him, somewhat. "So where are we going, then? If you haven't decided that without me already."

"Well, you and Ivy are still planning to find that golden dragon, right? I've been thinking on it and maybe poking around Valor's ruins some more might help," Wren admitted. She glanced back at Ivy. "You and Leaf encountered her there, right?"

Ivy nodded. "Yes! Since we left Valor I've been wondering about that, and since she took the sand dragons' treasure, she might be somewhere around that area! Or maybe further into the desert? I'm not sure."

Leaf smiled at Ivy. "I think you're right. It wouldn't hurt to give it a shot, would it?"

Glancing back at Sky, Wren rested a hand on his shoulder. "You think you can make it back to the ruins?" Sky nodded, a determined glint in his eyes.

Her attention was drifted away once she felt a light tapping on her shoulder. It was Ivy, who had a hesitant expression on her face.

She mumbled, "Could we eat something before leaving, though? I'm starving..."

*We could always hunt or gather fruits on the way there,* Wren wanted to reply, but didn't have the heart to say it to Ivy's face. *She probably isn't as used to travelling like the rest of us, I guess.*

Nodding in response, Wren shrugged. "I suppose so. It shouldn't be too hard to find something edible in the forest. We can go hunting for a bit, if that helps."

"Well, I'll just get some blueberries for myself," Sky replied, grimacing at the mention of hunting. "I still don't understand how any of you like eating meat."

Leaf turned to Ivy, a hopeful expression on his face. "You want to go hunting together?"

Ivy took a few steps back, shaking her head. "No, but thanks for the

offer." She instead glanced at Sky, asking, "Could I help? I prefer fruits over meat myself."

Sky gave her a small nod, much to Ivy's delight. Wren glanced at her brother, who seemed mostly surprised by Ivy declining his offer - and somewhat disappointed, as well. *That must feel awkward as hell,* She commented dryly to herself, glad she wasn't in Leaf's shoes. *I do feel bad for him, though.*

"Leaf, I can go hunting with you, if you want," She offered, hoping to diffuse any tension the two had. He brightened up a bit, though he still seemed vaguely upset. "You go on ahead, I'll catch up in a bit."

He had an amused yet bewildered look on his face, but didn't question it. He took off into the woods, though not without casting a glance over his shoulder every so often. Wren glanced back at Sky and Ivy, who were already chatting merily.

She crossed her arms. "You two will be alright together? On your own?"

"Yep! I'll make sure nothing awful happens out there, so don't worry," Ivy confirmed, nudging Wren in the shoulder. "I promise we'll meet you and Leaf back at the camp once we're done gathering fruit."

"Promise?"

"I just said I promise, you goof!" Ivy teased, giggling a bit. Her laughter dying down, she gave Wren a genuine look. "But I really do promise, Wren. Please try to trust me, okay?"

Wren sighed, nodding. "Okay, okay! I give in." As she turned around to leave, she added, "Just don't get yourselves hurt, okay?"

Ivy rolled her eyes in amusement, but gave Wren one last nod before letting Sky guide her into the forest. She ran over to Leaf, who had been tapping his fingers against his arms as he leaned against a nearby tree. He perked up once he saw Wren, something of a smile on his face.

She had to take a moment to catch her breath. "I'm...I'm back."

Leaf raised an eyebrow. "So what were you three even talking about?"

"Mostly reminding them to be careful." She frowned. "I'm hoping they know what they're doing, but I can't help but worry about them."

He sighed, nodding slightly. "I get that. I really wanted to go with Ivy, I have my doubts about splitting up. I'd feel a lot better about this if I was with her."

Wren rolled her eyes, scoffing. "Ivy, Ivy, Ivy! Sometimes you speak about her as if she's the only thing on your mind." Think on it a bit more, she added, "But really, I doubt Ivy needs any protection. You might be underestimating her. I'm more concerned about Sky..."

"I'm equally concerned about Sky!" He shot back. Before Wren could interrogate him further, he stopped suddenly, gesturing for her to remain silent.

*I want to know what that means,* She griped to no one in particular. As Leaf went ahead once more, she narrowed her eyes. *I'll figure that out sooner or later.*

# Chapter 2: Rowan

**ROWAN**

Rowan could hardly believe it.

Wren was alive, and so was Leaf, even after storming off from the mountain dragon palace. The dragonmancers had finally gotten their crimes exposed. She and Grove were finally out of jail. Rowan thought that it was a pretty great day in of itself, and the mild weather certainly was helping her mood.

She was sitting next to Grove, eating on one of the blueberries that Cranberry had gathered earlier that morning. Cranberry had been getting most of the food for them, as both Rowan and Grove were still feeling weak after being thrown into jail, and Thyme preferred to keep watch for any dragons. Grove was leaning on her shoulder, partially asleep. Thyme had been sitting nearby them, still not touching his own fruit.

Rowan glanced at Grove, gently nudging him awake. "Hey Grove? You awake enough to eat?"

He groaned, opening a single eye to look at her. "I don't have much of a choice, do I?"

"Not really," Rowan replied, handing him a small chunk of her own blueberry. "Come on, eat up. Cranberry didn't get these for nothing."

Grove grumbled underneath his breath, but didn't argue - he took a few bites out of the blueberry, though he still dozed off on Rowan's shoulder. Cranberry soon plopped down next to Rowan, practically flying out of the tangled undergrowth. Rowan lightly chuckled as she dropped a few blueberries on her lap.

Cranberry giggled awkwardly. "Sorry, Rowan."

"Aw, it's alright," She responded, handing the fruit back to

Cranberry. "You managed to get us all breakfast on your own, don't apologise."

Blushing slightly at Rowan's praise, she grinned. "I guess." She turned to Thyme, tilting her head. "Thyme? You okay?"

Surprised, he looked back at her. "You're back already? Huh." Now taking a few bites of his food, he shrugged. "I...just keeping watch for any dragons, I guess."

*I doubt we'll have as much of a reason to worry, but...I can see why he's being cautious over it.* After their journey to the mountain dragon palace, Thyme had been more jumpy whenever they stopped briefly in any sort of clearing. While Rowan found it irritating, she couldn't blame him. *He probably doesn't want a repeat of Mushroom...but Mushroom actually deserved it. He was a piece of shit.*

Grove lightly tapped Rowan's hand. "More," He mumbled.

She whipped her head around to face him, chuckling. "Now you're *demanding* more? You're lucky that you're doing such a good job of being adorable while doing it." She handed him the rest of the blueberry, already full.

Cranberry snorted. "Is he still tired?"

"Yes, I am," He snapped, his shoulders slumping. "I don't know how you manage to be so energetic this early."

Glancing up at the sky, Cranberry rolled her eyes. "It's almost noon! I don't know how you can still be tired after half of the day's gone!"

Rowan smirked. "You usually wake up at dawn, Cran. I'm still tired myself."

Giggling, she nodded. "True! I am still used to waking up that early. We- I always had to be up that early back in my troupe. Sleeping in was pretty taboo, if you know what I mean."

Grove lifted his head to stare at her. "You mean to say it wasn't allowed, or...?"

"What? No, no! Maybe that wasn't the best choice of words," She replied, her cheeks flushing. "It definitely wasn't encouraged, to say the least. I did it once and I got chewed out so badly for it! Never did that again."

Rowan raised an eyebrow. "That seems like an unnecessarily harsh reaction to sleeping in."

Cranberry looked as if she was going to argue, but sighed, nodding. "Yeah, I suppose you're right. I didn't mean to sleep in, either...not my fault that I had to practice so late."

As they all went quiet, Rowan's gaze rested on the sack of treasure they had taken from the dragon palace. *How exactly are the four of us supposed to start a whole new town with this?* She'd been wondering about that since Wren, Leaf, Ivy and Sky had taken off. They had debated it once since they left, but decided to wait until later to discuss their plan in full. *Having instructions on how to go about this would be great.*

She remembered what Wren had said about the Indestructible City; it was something about refugees, wasn't it? *I mean, heading there doesn't sound like a bad idea in the slightest...but we probably need to find a place to build the town.*

Cranberry poking Rowan's cheeks broke Rowan out of her inner monologue. She turned to Cranberry, sighing.

"Yes, Cranberry?"

She frowned. "You're making the grumpy face again. Something wrong?"

*Every time I think about something you always call it my 'grumpy face.'* Rowan didn't want to voice it out loud, though. She didn't want to start the day debating something stupid with Cranberry, and she'd feel bad about brushing off Cranberry's concern for her, anyhow.

Rowan shrugged. "Just thinking about our plan. With the treasure, to be blunt."

"I thought we agreed to make a new town," Thyme chimed in, now

looking at them.

"That's what I *meant*," Rowan muttered, not bothering to raise her voice.

Grove suddenly sat up. "Rowan, let's try to *avoid* a fight right now."

She huffed, glaring at him. "What? It was obvious what I meant with context, context that he has!"

Thyme groaned, shaking his head. "Okay, okay. I misunderstood. What about our plan were you thinking about?"

"All of it. Like, where are we going to build the town? How and where are we going to get the resources required to start building? Stuff like that," Rowan explained, ignoring the urge to groan in frustration.

Cranberry hummed to herself. "Maybe somewhere further away from Talisman? I mean, it'd probably be a long walk, but..."

Rowan nodded at her. "As long as it isn't too close to Talisman, I'm good." *I never want to be around it again for as long as I live.* "We could move closer to the Indestructible City."

"No," Grove immediately snapped, catching her attention. "I don't want to get too close to a place that big and with that much power."

Frowning, Rowan crossed her arms. "Like Talisman was any better."

Grove narrowed his eyes. "I'm not saying it was. I'm just saying, that place is dangerous and I want nothing to do with it. Not now, not then, not ever."

Cranberry leaned forwards, tilting her head. "Wait, what's so bad about the Indestructible City? I thought it was one of the safest places for humans to live, or so I've been told."

"Oh, it can be. If you manage to get in," Grove replied, sighing to himself. "And even then, the current lord of it is...he has a lot of ideas you'd disagree with, I'll leave it at that."

Rowan shrugged. "Still would rather that over dragonmancers."

Grove grimaced, but didn't comment on it any further. *He knows how I feel about that. Dragonmancers will always be at the top of my list.*

"Ah. Well, *our* town won't be anything like that *or* Talisman!" Cranberry raised a fist into the air, accidentally pushing Rowan to the side. *I would hope so.* "Oops. Sorry again, Rowan."

Rowan sighed. "It's okay."

Thyme spoke up once Cranberry sat back down. "Well, finding a place to set up would be nice and all, but it'd be pretty hard to start a new town with just the four of us."

Rowan tried to resist the urge to scowl. *He's right and I hate that.* But who would be willing to help? Wren, Leaf, Sky, and Ivy had already left, and she sure as hell did not like the idea of heading back to Talisman to ask around for assistance. *I'd rather die, honestly.*

"Oh dear," Cranberry murmured, rubbing her temple. "She's making the grumpy face again."

Grumbling, Rowan folded her arms in even more. "I'm not grumpy, I just hate that Thyme's right about that."

Grove raised an eyebrow. "...So you're grumpy?"

Rowan just silently glared off into space, refusing to answer. Cranberry let out a small snort of laughter, though she gently rubbed Rowan's back in sympathy. Grove glanced back at Thyme.

"I get that, but where would we go for assistance? I highly doubt we'd be able to get anywhere close to the Indestructible City's entrance, let alone getting inside - and we all know how Rowan feels about heading back to Talisman."

"Thank you for noticing," Rowan muttered to herself. Cranberry gave her shoulder a hard shove in response.

Thyme tipped his head thoughtfully. "Well, maybe Rowan doesn't

have to go with? Two of us could go to Talisman and check, while Rowan and someone else can stay here."

Rowan frowned. "I don't like that idea either! I don't want to be surrounded by people who were fine with sacrificing innocents because the 'mystical' dragonmancers said so. No thanks, I'll pass."

Cranberry rested her chin on Rowan's shoulder. "Not all of them knew though, right? What about the ones who had no idea about the sacrifices? Before everything, I mean."

Grimacing, Grove shrugged. "I mean, the older villagers still let it happen. I'm not entirely sure if I'd feel alright around them, too."

"No, like...how do I word this?" Cranberry shook her head, groaning. "Rowan, what about your other sisters? Did they know anything about this?"

Rowan had to think for a moment before responding. *Did they know anything about the sacrifices? I don't think so...* She never particularly had the chance to tell any of her other siblings the truth about Wren, aside from Leaf - their parents had always been keeping an eye on her since locking her in the cellar. She never exactly felt safe in her own home after that...moving in with Grove had been one of the best days after the event. It also didn't help with the thoughts that none of her younger siblings would believe her - she could have sworn that she heard her parents' voices ridiculing her, laughing that her siblings would believe that Wren was sacrificed, or that Rowan would fight for Wren's life. *I'm not sure what it was that kept me from telling them. But they didn't know and it's my fault. They'd know some of the truth by now, I'd guess...*

"*Rowan.*" Cranberry's voice broke into her thoughts.

Blinking at her a few times, Rowan shook her head. "Not until Wren said the dragonmancers and our parents tried to sacrifice her, I think."

Cranberry noticed Rowan's expression - she sighed, gently wrapping her arms around Rowan's waist. Rowan could feel her own cheeks heating up, though she didn't comment on it - she didn't mind the

hug that much, enjoyed it, even. Grove placed his hand on Rowan's own hands, apparently sharing Cranberry's sentiments. Even Thyme had scooted closer to the group to comfort Rowan. *Even if my parents never bothered to try, I know my friends will be there for me.*

Breaking the moment of silence, Thyme hesitantly asked, "So they likely would have no clue about the sacrifices or be alright with that happening?"

"That's right," Rowan confirmed, barely trying to raise the volume of her voice. She didn't particularly enjoy speaking about this subject. "What about it?"

"We could try seeing if they would be interested in helping." Thyme shrugged awkwardly, seeming unsure of his answer. "I mean, it wouldn't be a bad idea, would it?"

"That sounds like a great idea!" Cranberry beamed. "We should do that!"

Grove frowned. "Well, not at all, but...that's up to Rowan to decide. They're her family, after all."

The smile disappearing from her face, Cranberry nodded. "Y-Yeah, you have a point, Grove." She glanced up at Rowan. "So...any thoughts?"

*Me?* She wasn't entirely sure if it was the best idea to let *her* decide their plans. The last time she came up with a plan it devolved into Grove and her almost getting sacrificed by the dragonmancers. *I don't want to let anyone else get hurt because of me. What if Bluebell or Camellia got hurt because they came with us? I've already hurt Leaf and Wren because of my own actions...I don't want to hurt my other siblings.*

"Uh...well, a lot," Rowan managed to muster. "I mean, do you all really think it'd be best for me to decide? I haven't exactly made the smartest decisions lately." *And by lately, I mean almost never.*

"Rowan, that's *your* family. It's your call," Cranberry reminded her, or at least tried to.

Grove simply scoffed. "Yes, we do. Cranberry just said it, but your

sisters are still your family. If you want to try, we can do it. We won't do it if you don't want us to."

Rowan grimaced. "No, I do want to at least talk to them again, it's just...what if everything goes wrong again?" She leaned into her own legs, resting her chin on her arms. "What if it only ends up getting them hurt? That would be on me. And I don't think I could take it."

She could feel a tear or two falling onto her arms - honestly, she didn't have the energy to care at that point. Cranberry wiped away a few of the tears, though she still had an arm wrapped around Rowan.

"You wouldn't be at fault for that, Rowan," Grove murmured, rubbing his fingers against Rowan's hand. "Not now, not ever."

Thyme nodded in agreement. "You can't just give up on yourself every time something goes wrong. Sometimes taking the risk is worth it."

"Yeah!" Cranberry piped in. "And even if it was your fault, you aren't the type of person to hurt them on purpose! Please don't bring yourself down over it, Rowan."

Letting out something of a wheezing laugh, Rowan sighed. "There isn't much I can say to convince any of you otherwise, is there?" She looked back up, meeting their gazes. "But I guess you're all right. It wouldn't hurt to try."

Cranberry smiled at her. "So we're all in agreement? We're going to visit Talisman?"

A hum of agreement seemed to drift around the group - Rowan returned Cranberry's gesture, though she could still feel the rocks sitting in the pit of her stomach. *I'm still not sure if this is the smartest idea.*

# Chapter 3: Violet

**VIOLET**

"Come *on*, Violet! I swear this is a great idea!"

"The last great idea you had involved slathering yourself with *butter!*"

"*I was eight.* And it was a wonderful idea, you're just jealous of my intellect!"

"So sneaking into a Wingwatcher meeting is a wonderful idea now?"

"We *are* Wingwatchers!"

"Wingwatcher *apprentices*."

"Same thing! Besides, it's not like they can kick us out! We're far too invaluable for that. Seriously Violet, you're worrying about this way too much. We'll be fine."

Sneaking into a Wingwatcher meeting was not Violet's idea of fun. While she had to admit she was curious to learn what they were discussing, she wasn't interested in going in the slightest. She'd much rather stay at home with a cup of warm milk and a book. Now *that* was fun. Unfortunately, Daffodil never seemed to share those sentiments, that one in specific.

Violet raised an eyebrow at Daffodil. "Brook can still suspend our training." *And besides...I don't want to go anyways.*

Daffodil scoffed. "We're so close to being promoted to full Wingwatchers it won't even matter!"

"Yeah...we'll end up being promoted in the next three years at this rate."

Rolling her eyes, Daffodil crossed her arms. "Violet, why are you

being so uncooperative right now? *Especially* for things like this! You'd normally be all about finding out what's going on in the Wingwatcher meetings."

*Because I don't want to think about any of this Wingwatcher stuff when Ivy isn't around. Or because I'm still upset with Ivy just leaving us behind like that. You know, the obvious.* Violet wasn't going to say it out loud, however - she had a feeling that Daffodil knew that all too well and she preferred not talking about it.

She sighed. "I just don't think this is a good use of our time. Can't we do something else?"

"This *is* a productive way to spend our time!" Daffodil snapped. Exhaling deeply, she turned around, adding, "Look, you don't have to come with. But I want to know what's going on, so I'm going anyways - with or without you."

As Daffodil began to walk away, Violet blinked in shock; she was being serious about this? *Usually she'd never go to do something on her own, especially without me...is Daff angry with me?* Violet didn't like the idea, but it seemed plausible - whenever Daffodil was furious with Violet, end result was usually being ignored for a few days or so. *What did I do this time, though? I mean, she doesn't seem angry with me, but...*

*I wish Ivy was here. She'd know how to handle situations like this.* Violet frowned, looking down at her shoes. *She'd be able to tell if Daffodil's just angry with me or if she isn't. She's always been better at this stuff than I have.*

*Why did she have to leave so suddenly?*

"Vi? Are you..." Daffodil had took one last glance at Violet, her gaze wide. She came over to Violet, her hand gently brushing against Violet's cheeks. "I know you don't want me to go by myself, but please don't cry over it."

*Oh moons, am I crying? In front of Daff, of all people?* Violet tried to ignore the rising feeling of embarrassment in her cheeks.

She shook her head. "No, that's not...that's not why. I'm just...thinking about something else." She took Daffodil's other hand, sighing. "But you're dead set on going regardless, aren't you?"

Grimacing, Daffodil gave in, nodding. "Yeah. I can tell you everything that they said afterwards, though! So you don't have to come with if you really don't want to."

"You'll probably end up getting caught and getting punished for sneaking into it," Violet snorted. "And if there's nothing I can say to convince you otherwise, then I'll have to come with anyways. It's just not right when we aren't doing stupid shit together."

Lightly nudging Violet's shoulder, Daffodil smiled. "Aww, I love doing stupid shit with you too, Violet!" *I'm more surprised she paid attention to that than what I said earlier...but I agree.* "Now come on! I think there's a tunnel that leads somewhere into the main cavern somewhere."

...

Nearing a somewhat large entrance, Daffodil flashed a grin at Violet.

"I think this is one of the entrances." Daffodil tilted her head at the door. "Not sure if it's the main one, though. But we still should be able to get inside. Somehow..."

Violet narrowed her eyes. "Daff, if this is the main entrance, we're practically done for. Please tell me you aren't serious when you say you aren't sure."

An awkward laugh escaping her lips, Daffodil shrugged. "Don't worry, maybe it isn't the main entrance."

"*Maybe?!*" Violet snapped, immediately cupping her mouth in her hands once she realised she had risen her voice a bit too much for comfort. "Damn it, damn it-"

Daffodil grabbed Violet by the arm, and attempted to swerve towards the nearest corner as the footsteps from the room drew closer. *Damn it Daff, why did you let me come with?* Before Daffodil

could get to the corner, Foxglove had already stepped out of the room, a vaguely amused expression on her face.

She chuckled lightly. "Everyone could hear you both bickering from a mile away, you know."

Violet's cheeks flushed, while Daffodil stiffened beside her. *Are we in trouble?* As Foxglove gestured for them to come closer, Daffodil reluctantly stepped away from the corner, Violet trailing from behind her.

Daffodil groaned. "Are we going to be punished for this?"

Foxglove shrugged. "Don't know. Brook just gave up on trying to ignore your bickering and said to just bring you both in already."

Frowning, Violet crossed her arms. "But we're only Wingwatcher apprentices."

"And that stopped you from trying to sneak into the meeting?" Foxglove teased, raising an eyebrow. Daffodil grumbled underneath her breath while Violet shifted closer to her. "Come on, you both might as well come inside. It'll give you some experience for when you have to come to these meetings, anyways."

Following Foxglove inside, Violet remained close to Daffodil as she tried to ignore the questioning gazes of the older Wingwatchers. *I mean, none of them look angry at us, so I guess that's something,* She thought to herself. *Still nerve racking.* They stood next to Foxglove, Squirrel also sitting nearby. Violet's gaze scanning the cavern, it seemed like most Wingwatchers chose to stand throughout the meetings, though there were a few sitting down. *How could anyone stand around for that long?*

Sitting close by was Brook, who had a cup of hot tea in her hands, bags underneath her eyes. *She's still commander? I thought she would've given that responsibility to someone else so she could focus on ruling Valor.* Violet wasn't entirely surprised, either - she'd seen how enthusiastic Brook was about Wingwatching at the welcome ceremony. *Still, just what has she been doing that makes her that tired?* Brook seemed to be more observant than Violet had hoped for,

noticing Violet staring at her.

She sighed. "Kid, I've had a long day." Taking another sip of her tea, she turned to the rest of the Wingwatchers. "I get that no one particularly wants to go to the old ruins while we still have the tunnel to fix. But some of our own are still there, and let's not forget all of the other banished citizens of Valor."

From his corner, Chipmunk muttered, "No one wants to do it because we'll just get eaten anyways."

Whipping her head around to face him, Foxglove scoffed. "I and several others have been to the old ruins before, and not once has anyone gotten eaten on the way there and back! You're just a coward."

Violet felt a smidge bad for Chipmunk upon seeing his flushed expression, but shrugged it off. *Foxglove does have a point. Even Daff and I have been to the old ruins before, Daff even more than I have. And we're just apprentices!*

Foxglove glanced back at Brook. "I can lead a patrol there, if you'd like. No one else seems up to it, anyways."

Brook sleepily nodded at her. "Thank you, Foxglove. Feel free to take whoever you'd like on the patrol, but I'll be coming with."

"Um, commander? With all due respect, wouldn't it be more beneficial for you to stay in Valor?" Squirrel was now standing up, an eyebrow raised. "The tunnel still needs supervision while we're shoring it up."

"I'll ask Lark if she can help out. She has more experience with that sort of stuff than I do," Brook replied, gently stirring her tea. "But I'll be going because I want to know if everyone in the ruins are alright for myself. Does anyone have any objections?"

A quiet hum of agreement seemed to stir around the other Wingwatchers - Brook appeared to take this as a sign to dismiss the meeting gesturing for them to leave. As most of the Wingwatchers began to leave, Brook turned to Violet and Daffodil, narrowing her

eyes.

She pointed at them. "You two, stay." *So are we actually in trouble, or...? Either way I'm not looking forwards to explaining this to my dads...*

Once the last Wingwatcher left, Brook craned her neck to see if the door had been closed, then took another sip of her tea. Daffodil was standing closer to Violet, her shoulders tensed up.

She grimaced. "So what's our punishment?"

"Punishment? What are you on about?" Brook asked, a questioning look on her face. "I don't punish apprentices for being curious. Besides, you both will end up participating in these soon enough."

Violet almost let out a sigh of relief. *Thank the moons for that, at least.*

Daffodil tilted her head. "I thought you were going to punish us because we aren't allowed to be here."

"Well, yes, you aren't supposed to be here. But I'd rather you two be in here than have to talk over you both bickering right outside the main entrance." Brook let out a sigh, shrugging her shoulders. "That aside, that's not what I wanted to talk to you about. I'm going to tell you both now that I don't want either of you attempting to join the patrol to the ruins."

Violet huffed. "We weren't planning on it!"

Brook snorted. "Your record of following instructions says otherwise." She stood up, finishing the last bit of tea. "Look, I get that you want to help out with some of the bigger issues - while you both definitely helped with the whole Dragonslayer situation in your own right, you have to understand that you both are just apprentices. You still have a few years of training before I can trust you both to do patrols out on the surface."

"But we've *been* to the old ruins before! I had to live there for a brief amount of time. We could be a great help on the patrol!" Daffodil argued. "You can absolutely trust us to do patrols!"

"Daffodil, no. You both aren't going and that's final," Brook snapped, already leaving the cave. She sighed, taking one last glance at the two. "But for what it's worth, you both are good Wingwatchers. Don't take this personally."

As she left, Violet glanced at Daffodil, who was staring glumly at her feet. Placing her hand on Daffodil's shoulder, Violet gave her a small smile.

"Hey, don't do that," She murmured. "It'll be alright."

Daffodil groaned. "I know. But don't you think it's a bit silly that Brook won't trust us out there? I mean, especially me!" She crossed her arms. "I just wish we could come along with."

Violet's smile turned into a smirk. "I may or may not have a solution to that."

# Chapter 4: Wren

**WREN**

Wren glanced over Sky's shoulder as they flew in the air - smaller mountains remained below them. *I'm so glad we don't have to walk through that mountain range,* She thought to herself. *That'd take way too long, honestly. And I don't think Ivy or Leaf would enjoy that...*

She glanced over her shoulder, turning to Ivy and Leaf. "How are you both holding up so far?"

Leaf was just barely clinging onto Sky's back, trembling a bit. Ivy, on the other hand, seemed perfectly content - hell, Wren could swear she seemed more excited if anything.

"I don't think I'll ever get used to this," He mumbled, clutching his stomach.

Ivy raised a brow at him, chuckling. "You alright, Leaf?"

He gave her a small smile. "Could be feeling better." He attempted to subtly inch closer to Ivy, which Wren wanted to guess was out of wariness. "How are you enjoying this?"

Ivy shrugged, still laughing. "Don't know, but it's awesome! I don't get how *you* don't like it." She glanced back at Wren, tilting her head a bit. "So you and Sky get to do this every day?"

Wren grinned. "More or less."

"Wow..." Ivy breathed, her eyes wide. "This is all so amazing."

*Someone's lived her whole life under a rock,* Wren commented to herself, quickly wanting to smack herself for thinking that. That wasn't exactly wrong - all of Valor was located underground, wasn't it? No wonder Ivy was so excited about everything. *Glad I didn't let that one slip out...*

Leaf lightly nudged her shoulder. "You say that about everything these days."

"I know, but it's true! This even better than the first time I got to go outside!" She looked over Sky's shoulder, her hair whipping her face. "I'm so glad I left Valor. Everything out here is beautiful."

"Well, almost everything," Leaf coughed to himself - Wren wanted to rebuke him for bringing Ivy's mood down, but she didn't seem to be paying attention to either of them anymore. So instead she settled for a simple glare.

She gently rubbed her hand against Sky's neck, craning her neck a little to catch his eye. "Sky, how are you doing? Do you need to take a break?"

Sky smiled at her. "Well, I think I'm doing pretty alright, considering there's three of you on my back right now. But could we take a small break?"

"We can do that." Wren gave him a curt nod, then turning to Ivy and Leaf. "We're going to land in a bit!"

Leaf let out a breath of relief. "Thank the moons." Ivy rolled her eyes at him in response.

...

Once they found a relatively smaller clearing, Sky had landed, though making sure to be mindful of Leaf and Ivy. Wren hopped off once given the opportunity, Leaf doing the same, albeit struggling a bit to do so. He glanced back at Ivy, who was slowly getting down.

"Ivy, I can help you down if you want."

She shook her head. "No thanks, I think I can get down by myself." As she slid off of Sky's back, she found herself accidentally tripping over her own foot - which ended up landing her on top of Wren, the both of them falling over in the process.

Wren let out a small yelp. "I-Ivy!"

Ivy drew back, her cheeks flushed. "Sorry Wren!" She got to her feet, brushing off her tunic. She gave Wren an awkward smile. "Didn't mean to fall on you, I swear."

Wren snorted in response, standing up as well. "It's alright." Ivy seemed to relax a little, joining in on Wren's laughter. Leaf just rolled his eyes, and while it bugged Wren, she wasn't going to bother with that.

*I swear, sometimes he really needs to stop taking everything so seriously,* She thought. *It's not my fault if Ivy can be a little clumsy.*

"So...Ivy, are you doing any better since this morning?" Wren asked, hoping to dissolve the tension.

Ivy shrugged, yawning. "A little. I wouldn't mind a nap, though."

Leaf frowned at her. "You should probably try going to sleep earlier, then. I know for a fact that there's no one hunting us down during the dead of night."

"I have tried that, and it never works *or* helps!" Ivy argued, throwing her hands in the air. "I always end up waking up a few hours into sleeping, anyways. I don't see how going to sleep earlier will help."

Wren stared at them both, bewildered. "Wait, wait - what are you both even talking about?"

Ivy looked as if she was about to respond, but Leaf jumped in before she could say anything.

"Are you sure you want to share it?" He asked, raising an eyebrow.

She blinked at him, confused. "We're also travelling with Wren and Sky. They should both know." Leaf was disgruntled by her response, but said nothing else.

*Why is he acting so upset about that, anyways? It's Ivy's business, not his.*

Ivy glanced back at Wren, sighing. "I...well, you see, since the whole

situation with the Wingwatcher arrests happened and Leaf, Daffodil, Stone and I had to live in the ruins for a while, I developed a sort of sleeping problem, if that makes sense? It just got really hard to go to sleep while knowing there were people hunting you down and even if I did get to sleep, it was even harder to go back to sleep. I usually just slept closer to Daffodil when it happened, but...as you can see, she's not with us."

She turned to Leaf briefly. "Her dad was the one who drove you four out of the city and ordered the arrests, right?"

"Uh...yes. Why do you ask?"

Wren ignored his question and looked back at Ivy. "Your dad's a piece of shit."

Sky glared at her. "Wren, I'm pretty sure that shouldn't be the first thing you say after someone admits they have sleeping issues!"

"I'm not wrong!" Wren shot back, crossing her arms. Ivy remained silent, avoiding everyone else's gaze - Leaf appeared to pick up on this, glaring at Wren.

"Quit trying to upset her!" He snapped, earning a bewildered look from Ivy in the process.

"I'm not upset, Leaf. I'm just thinking." She sighed to herself, shaking her head. "I know he's terrible. But I can't help but see him as my father still."

"Some father he was," Wren muttered. "If he lost his temper to the point where his own daughter has to run away from home to feel safe, then he doesn't deserve to be called one."

Ivy just grimaced, her gaze unblinking. "I-I guess you're right."

Leaf threw another glare at Wren before placing a hand on Ivy's shoulder. "You okay?"

She brushed his hand aside, walking away from the group. "I want to be left alone for a bit." She sat next to a nearby cluster of pebbles, ignoring Leaf's attempts to get her to stay.

Sighing, Leaf folded his arms. "Wren, I agree with you but you came off way too strong for Ivy."

"I can see that now, Leaf!" Wren shot back. *And now I feel a little bad for it...a little. She should realise that he never was an actual father to her, regardless of whether they're related or not.*

Leaf just scoffed at her, already beginning to walk towards Ivy. "I'll go talk to her." Wren immediately grabbed his arm, pulling him back. "Wren, what-"

"She *just* said she wants to be left alone for a bit! Can't you respect that?"

"Oh? And are *you* going to talk to her about it, then?"

"That's not even what I *said*, you daft-"

"Both of you, stop fighting!" Sky intervened, pulling Wren away from Leaf before she could say more. He gave both of them a stern look. "If Ivy wants her own space for a bit, let's give her that, okay? I'll talk to her once she's in the mood, because the both of you clearly can't." He remained silent for a moment, then added, "I'm going to stretch my wings for a bit."

Before Wren could say anything more, Sky stalked off, though not too far away. Ivy was still sitting by herself, occasionally glancing back at the three, but refused to move from her spot. Wren could've sworn she saw a few tears welling up in her eyes, and if it was the case, it didn't make Wren feel any better about the situation.

She glared at Leaf. "You're being way too overbearing and clingy, you know that?"

"How is being concerned over her 'overbearing'?" He snapped back, keeping his voice low.

Wren shrugged, rolling her eyes. "I don't know, how about the fact that you constantly try to comfort her and defend her when she clearly doesn't want that kind of attention from you?" Avoiding meeting his gaze, she muttered, "She doesn't seem the least bit interested, either."

Leaf scoffed. "If she wasn't interested, then she wouldn't have let me kiss her."

Wren simply stared at him for a moment before responding. "There's so many things wrong with that statement that I'm not sure where I should even begin." She sighed, shaking her head. "Look, I don't want to get involved with...whatever this is but I'm just going to suggest that you and Ivy talk this through and leave it at that."

He frowned, but didn't argue. "I guess I could do that." Leaf let out a sharp exhale, shoving his hands in his pockets. "So...how exactly do you manage to stay in the air that long without getting sick?"

Wren laughed. "You get used to it."

"That'll be the day," He groaned, though he was vaguely amused. His gaze darted around the clearing for a bit, adding, "I wonder how much longer it'll take to the ruins? It didn't take us that long to go from Valor and back to Talisman."

"I don't know, maybe a few days at least? We should be fine," Wren replied, sitting on the ground. "I just want to avoid any dragon cities and the Indestructible City for the time being. Sky got dragon-napped last time he went to a dragon city and I don't like the Indestructible City much." *And I'm still mad at Undauntable.*

Leaf raised an eyebrow. "So the main reason we're headed this route is because you don't want to go near it?"

Wren smirked. "Maybe."

As the two talked for a bit longer, Leaf stopped, looking from behind Wren. Wren turned to see Ivy walking over to them, still appearing somewhat downcast. She met both of their gazes.

"Hey," She greeted them. "You guys did realise I wasn't that far away from you, right?"

Wren didn't particularly enjoy the implications Ivy's statement had - neither did Leaf, apparently, as his cheeks flushed with embarrassment. *At least I don't have to get involved with that mess.* She glanced back at Ivy, grimacing.

"Um, Ivy? I'm...I'm sorry if I was a bit too harsh with you," Wren sighed. "I just...have strong opinions against people like your father." *People who don't even care for their own children. Like my own.*

Ivy shrugged, folding her arms. "I can tell you're sorry, Wren. And I get where you're coming from. But I'm still kind of angry with you." She gave Leaf a side glance. "*And* you."

Wren wanted to argue, but she didn't want to upset Ivy even more. *And she has some right to be angry with me, I suppose.* Instead she gestured for Ivy to sit down, which she did so with mild confusion.

"Where's Sky?" She asked, tilting her head.

"He's stretching his wings for a bit. It doesn't take him all that long," Wren replied. She whirled around only to spot Sky rushing over to them, an expression of worry on his face. She immediately stood up, both concerned and worried. *What happened? Did he get attacked by someone? If he did, I'm going to find whoever did and-* "Sky, what happened?"

He took in a deep breath. "I think the soldiers from the Indestructible City are following us, Wren."

# Chapter 5: Rowan

***brief a/n: for reference, Mallow is the name of Wren's unnamed sister. in this fanfic, Camellia is 22, Mallow is 18, and Bluebell is 16.***

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**ROWAN**

*This is such a stupid idea. Why did I agree to this, again?*

She was walking in between Grove and Cranberry, with Thyme taking the lead. Rowan wasn't exactly thrilled that they were headed back, to say the least - but having Grove and Cranberry with her did help her be somewhat at ease. *They don't have to be by my side all the time, though.*

Rowan didn't particularly *want* to dwell on that, though. At least, not at the moment. She was more concerned with how her sisters would react to her since they removed the dragonmancers from power. Were they disgusted with her for hiding the truth from them for so long? Or did they more upset with the fact that she'd left without even talking to them?

*They'll probably hate me for it like Leaf. I wouldn't blame them, either.*

Cranberry's palm brushed against Rowan's hand. She gave Rowan a reassuring smile - Rowan smiled back, blushing and slightly dumbfounded. *She's always so sweet to me. Why is she so nice to me? I'm not sure what I've even done to deserve it...* Grove's chuckling pulled her out of her thoughts.

"You both are adorable," He commented. Cranberry simply giggled, while Rowan simply blushed harder, unable to resist letting out a few laughs.

Thyme grinned at them, though he didn't comment on it. "We

should be close to one of the underground shelters." His gaze rested on Rowan. "You don't have to go in the village with us, you know. You could wait in one of the shelters till we come back."

Rowan shook her head. "No, it's...it's fine. I should come with, anyways. I need to speak with my sisters whether I want to or not." *And I need to know if they hate me for hiding the truth about Wren too.*

Grove frowned, resting his arm on Rowan's shoulder. "I can do most of the talking, if that helps."

Something resembling a smile tugged at her lips. "Thanks."

They didn't talk much for the rest of the walk to Talisman. Cranberry had been trying to soothe Rowan's nerves for most of the walk, but Rowan didn't feel that it was helping much if at all. She was grateful for it, though. Upon reaching the village itself however, Rowan didn't feel as sick to her stomach as she had felt when the idea was initially presented to her - it was still there, of course, but the gut feeling felt slightly better.

Rowan could see some villagers walking about, though not without warily glancing up at the sky for dragons - the warning bell was also still standing, along with the dragonmancers' old study. *Did anything even change since we left? I wouldn't put it past them, honestly...* She wanted to try and be positive that these people could change their ways, but she felt that even a little faith in them was too much.

"Rowan, where would your sisters be at this time?" Grove asked, turning to her.

She shrugged. "I don't know...it's not like I paid much attention to them. I remember Bluebell enjoying wandering around the village a lot, though. She might be out."

Thyme nodded. "Yeah, I think I remember her doing that...a lot. Wasn't she the one you said thought that she could speak to butterflies?"

"Yep."

Cranberry blinked at Rowan. "Wait, you weren't joking about that?"

Inhaling sharply, Rowan shook her head. "No." She shrugged. "But that was when Bluebell was nine, so hell knows if she still thinks that. She still wanders around the village randomly, though."

"Well, we can ask around for her," Grove suggested.

Rowan grimaced. "What if we can't find her? Does that mean we can leave, or...?"

He rolled his eyes. "Well, you know where Camellia lives, don't know? She's long moved out of your parents house by now."

Almost immediately Rowan wanted out at the suggestion of going to Camellia. *I really don't want to talk to her again, no thank you, Grove.* While Rowan didn't *hate* or *dislike* her sister per say, Rowan didn't particularly favour Camellia over the others. Camellia had always been more rude and snappy with everyone when any adults weren't around and had always been snobbish, at least in Rowan's opinion - Rowan could live with it, but she'd much rather speak with someone else in Talisman.

Cranberry held back a few chuckles upon seeing Rowan's expression. "I assume she's not your first pick."

"Well, I would hope not!" Rowan snapped, huffing. "She annoys me."

Grove let out a snort of laughter. "Well, for your sake, let's hope we can find Bluebell."

...

It had only been a bit of poking around Talisman, but Rowan was already feeling sick just hanging around the outskirts of the village. She had asked if she could wait until the others were done - Cranberry had wanted to come with, but Rowan didn't particularly want to be around anyone else at the moment. She was walking in the section of the forest where she and Leaf used to spar together...how long ago had it been?

*Years from now, I think,* She answered, ignoring a pang of sadness in her chest. *I miss those days. Back when he didn't hate me, I mean.*

Did Leaf still hate her for that? She doubted it, but...it wouldn't surprise her if he still disliked her for lying. *Which I can't blame him for. I...I have been an awful older sister to all my siblings. Especially to him and Wren.* Rowan had been trying to avoid those types of thoughts since she already knew how those conversations in her head would go by now, but when she had no one else to talk to, it was exceptionally hard to avoid it.

*Cranberry would probably try to reassure me that he doesn't hate me,* She mused. *And honestly? She's probably right. I'm probably just overthinking, but...*

"Ugh, this is all a load of crap. None of this would be happening if it weren't for mom and dad and the *dragonmancers*-" Rowan plopped down next to a nearby tree trunk, sighing. She curled up into her arms and legs, lowering her head. "If it weren't for me..."

*If it weren't for me, then maybe everything would be better.*

Rowan ignored the tears falling onto her cheeks, though she couldn't help but let out a few sniffles. She *loathed* the fact that she was now crying over it (*again*), but it did feel a little better to release her tears, for the time being. As she remained sitting down, she felt a hand touch her shoulders, catching her attention. She looked up, expecting to see Cranberry or Grove or Thyme - to her surprise, she locked gazes with Bluebell, who seemed just as shocked to see Rowan.

Bluebell tilted her head questioningly at her. "Rowan? It's really you? You're...back?"

Rowan wasn't entirely sure what to say - she didn't think any of her sisters would find her while she was out in the woods, but now that one of them had?

"I...sort of?" Rowan avoided meeting Bluebell's gaze. "What are you doing out here, anyways?"

Bluebell sat down next to Rowan, frowning. "I could ask the same of you. But to answer your question, I was taking a walk. I wanted to find some butterflies, but...this is just as good!"

Rowan shrugged. "I...really did not want to come back, Bluebell. And I don't intend on staying."

"Why are you here, then? And are Wren and Leaf with you? I never got to say goodbye to them..."

*What am I supposed to say to that? Neither of them are with us, and I hate seeing Bluebell upset. But if she finds out I lied to her...I couldn't. Not again.*

"Well...no. They aren't with me," Rowan confessed, exhaling deeply. "They took off on their own. It's just Grove, Cranberry, Thyme and I."

Bluebell glanced down at her feet, her shoulders slumped. "Oh."

Rowan grimaced. *Yeah...this is the exact kind of conversation I wanted to avoid. And yet...* Gently nudging Bluebell with her arm, she wasn't entirely sure how this attempt at comfort would go.

"Hey, don't...don't cry. I'm sure you'll see them again one day." Rowan was almost certain that was the *wrong* thing to say, but then again, her other option was to bail. "You still have Camellia and Mallow to take care of you, don't you?"

Bluebell shrugged. "Camellia hasn't talked to Mallow or I since you guys left. And Mallow and I don't really...talk to each other that much any more, either." She sighed. "I know we've never been exactly close, but...everything that happened that day was really upsetting, Rowan. Camellia said she needed time to think, which obviously she's just brooding, and Mallow-"

Rowan rested her hand on Bluebell's shoulder. "Listen, Bluebell? I'm really sorry about not telling any of you the truth sooner. I didn't mean for things to come out that way, I swear."

"Hmm, I believe you, but Camellia might not forgive you for it." Bluebell gave Rowan a weak smile. "But you didn't answer my other

question."

Laughing awkwardly, Rowan smiled back. "Oh, that. Well, uh...my friends and I might be trying to see if anyone would like to help us build our village? By 'anyone' I mean you, Mallow and Camellia..."

Bluebell's gaze widened. "Wait, really? You want us to help you? *And* you're building a village?"

Rowan nodded. "Yeah...? If you wanted to come with. You don't have to."

Bluebell grinned. "That sounds *awesome*. I'm coming with you guys." She stood up, stretching. "I really don't want to keep living with mom and dad, anyways..."

"Did they do anything to you? Or Mallow and Camellia, for that matter," Rowan asked, her voice laced with concern. *It wouldn't shock me if they did. They never looked at us the same way again after Wren.*

She grimaced. "I...they were really mad." Bluebell clearly looked too uncomfortable to speak about it, but Rowan could form an educated guess judging from her expression. *That's disgusting.* "But it won't happen anymore since we're leaving! ...Right?"

Rowan stood up, awkwardly embracing Bluebell in a hug. Or at least, tried to. "Bluebell, I'd never hurt you like them. You know that." To Rowan's shock, Bluebell hugged back - she couldn't help but smile.

"I know, Rowan," Bluebell drawled, giggling. She held on for a bit longer, then drew back. "You're a surprisingly good hugger, for someone who hates touch. Anyone ever tell you that?"

Snorting, Rowan nodded lightly. "A few times, yeah." She glanced around their surroundings, then sighed. "We should probably find my friends. They're probably worried about me by now..."

Bluebell shrugged. "Well, I would hope so! Maybe they've already talked to Camellia and Mallow about it?"

*Maybe.* Rowan didn't particularly want to comment on that, mainly out of hope that they had already finished talking with Camellia so Rowan didn't have to. *I know Camellia isn't going to be happy with me for this. I mean, she's never happy with me for anything, but...*

"I suppose so," Rowan mumbled. "But do you really think Camellia will be able to tolerate me regardless? Most of our conversations end with yelling and insults." *Which...I wish I felt worse about. But I really don't feel bad about yelling at Camellia.*

Bluebell gently patted Rowan's back. "Aw, Rowan. Camellia will come around at some point! But if not, then I'm still with you."

Rowan said nothing in response, only giving Bluebell an awkward smile. She still wasn't sure about this whole idea. She still wasn't sure if coming back to Talisman was a good idea. *But I do know at least one of my sisters doesn't hate me for everything...even if I deserve it.* Rowan doubted that alone made the trip worth it, but...it made a little part of her feel just the tiniest bit better.

# Chapter 6: Brook

***brief a/n: Wintersweet and Yarrow are OCs that belong to me. while only really mentioned through Heath being stupid, Holly was also made into a character here.***

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**BROOK**

Brook scowled at the papers scattered across her desk. She was sitting in her office, still reading through the paperwork she had been neglecting to work on for days now. Most of the overdue papers were related to her duties as the commander of the Wingwatchers, but the other half was related to her new duties as lord of Valor. Which was something she didn't *entirely* mind, but she hated how it got in the way of her other job that she enjoyed more.

*Well, maybe neglecting isn't the right word,* She thought, tightening her grip on her pencil. *Because last I checked, I didn't get a choice in being arrested for the stupidest reason.*

Brook had just started on working on ideas to solve some of the issues brought up in their last Wingwatcher meeting - and then Heath called a mandatory meeting and arrested her shortly afterwards. She vividly remembered kicking and pulling the hair of several of Heath's men that day. *I still can't believe he had the gall to do that publicly. I knew he disliked me, but...*

But she knew there wasn't anything she could do about it now. It was all settled with, and Heath finally lost his power - she didn't particularly *want* to dwell on it, but her mind constantly drifted back to her frustration and rage that the whole issue happened in the first place.

"All these tunnel problems wouldn't even be *things* if he was never lord in the first place!" She groaned, digging her face into her palms. "By all moons, did he have to be *that* inefficient at problem

solving?"

To Brook, it felt like most of her recent work as Valor's new lord was cleaning up Heath's mess. And she loathed *every second of it*. It was always a reminder that she shouldn't even be in the position she was currently in, and a position she didn't particularly *want*, either. Not that she minded it much, but she was perfectly content with remaining commander of the Wingwatchers. Being the lord of Valor complicated that.

Brook glanced back down at the papers, sighing as she picked her quill back up. *Brook, you can rant about Heath's awful decisions later. You need to finish this now so Lark won't bother you about it AGAIN.*

Lark had been helping Brook out with most of her tasks, which Brook did appreciate, but she still found it annoying when Lark had to remind her to finish certain things. Which was often. Brook had to wonder how much free time Lark had on her hands to do this consistently, but then again, Lark always happened to have spare time whenever it was work related.

Skimming through the paper for the fifth time, Brook let out another frustrated groan and chucked her quill at the wall. She also wanted to throw the papers, but Lark had organised them for her yesterday and Brook wasn't going to risk getting a paper cut. Instead she settled for slamming her arms against her desk, resting her head on top of them.

*Ughhhh. Paperwork and cleaning this up isn't a good combination for my health.*

"Uhh, mom? You okay?"

Brook lifted her head; Forest was standing right outside the entrance, a questioning look on his face. He took a brief glance at the pencil now laying on the ground before quickly looking away.

She slumped in her chair. "I despise this paperwork. I just want to go on an outside patrol or work on the tunnels instead!"

"Now you know how I feel about skygazing notes," He muttered, his

gaze narrow.

Brook scoffed. "Skygazing notes aren't this bad, what are you even *talking* about? And they don't even have to be that long or complex!" *Well, unless you're a Wingwatcher apprentice whose name is Ivy...and have some sort of obsession with describing everything in detail. Especially the dragons.*

Forest rolled his eyes, but didn't argue. "Anyways, did you have any meetings planned today?"

Raising an eyebrow, she leaned into her chair. "No. Or at least, I don't think so. Why'd you ask?"

"You don't? Hmm." He frowned, glancing behind his shoulder. "That's confusing because Lark is at the door. Maybe you forgot?"

Brook quickly shot out of her seat. "Lark's *here*? *Now*? Okay, now I definitely know that I had nothing else planned - it's my paperwork day." *Just what is she doing here, anyways? It's not like she has to see me right now...and to be perfectly honest, I don't want her to see me complaining about paperwork.*

*...or her husband.*

Brook wasn't over the fact that Lark was with Heath *still*, despite everything. But she knew it was a sensitive topic for Lark, so Brook usually tried to avoid mentioning Heath specifically whenever their discussions got dangerously close to that. *And I'm not sure if I'd be able to restrain myself from saying all sorts of things while in that kind of mood.*

Forest nodded. "Did you, uh...want me to tell her you're busy? I can do that if you want."

"No, it's alright. Bring her in, I need a breather from all of *this* anyways," Brook replied, exhaling deeply. As he left the room, Brook rubbed her eyes. *And it'll give me something of an excuse to avoid doing some paperwork. Maybe.*

Brook got to her feet and walked over to where she threw her quill - she had to wonder why Lark was even coming over in the first

place. *I don't think we have any meetings scheduled until tomorrow,* She mused. *So why now? She hardly comes here if she doesn't have to.*

Before Brook could get back to her desk, Lark walked in, vaguely amused. She raised an eyebrow.

"Oh dear. What did your quill do to you this time, Brook?"

Brook knew what Lark was implying. Whenever Lark had caught Brook in one of her moments of frustration, Lark had began to find it funny to gently tease Brook about it. Namely, about her constantly throwing her quill across the room. Brook simply huffed and sat back down in her seat. *I mean, she* is *trying to be friendly outside of meetings.*

"I have overdue paperwork to finish," Brook groaned. "And I don't want to finish it. This quill is a reminder of that."

"Oh! I didn't know you were busy. I can leave, if you'd like."

"No, please stay," Brook sighed, rubbing her forehead. "Some company would be nice, all things considered."

"Really? Thank you!" Lark dragged a chair to the front of Brook's desk, sitting in it. "I hope I'm not too much of a bother."

Brook chuckled. "Nah, you're alright." As she resumed to her paperwork, Brook hummed quietly to herself. "So...what brings you here?"

Lark grimaced. "Well, um...it's kind of weird, I think. If it's weird that I just wanted to talk with you for a bit. I mean, I find it a little weird, at least. And pretty awkward, to be honest with you."

"Like...outside of our meetings?" Brook asked - Lark nodded in response. "That's not weird at all! In fact, I would love to speak to you more outside of those." *And I wish you kept speaking to me after I became the Wingwatcher commander. So you're right in that it's really awkward.*

An awkward smile was plastered onto Lark's face. "It's not? Well, that's a relief. I've been wanting to speak to you more lately,

anyways."

Brook shrugged. "Glad I can be of some help." Now lightly gnawing on the tip of the quill, she frowned. "Is there any specific reason you wanted to talk?" *Is everything alright at your home?*

Lark looked away. "I...I just want to talk to someone who I know won't yell at me for things that aren't my fault for once."

"Was Heath yelling at you *again*?" Brook asked, though she felt it came out more like a growl.

"I-I...I don't really want to talk about it," Lark confessed, folding her arms into her sleeves. "But to answer your question, yes."

*He really doesn't want to change, does he?* Brook would expect that he would have learned something from the ordeal with the stolen treasure, and try to hold back on his temper. Then again, Brook knew that Heath had always been a short fuse since their teenage years and was adamant about not working on it, so it didn't surprise her in the least that he was still unpleasant to be around, from her experience.

Sighing, Brook briefly glanced back at her. "Well, you can come vent to me about it whenever you need to. Or want to. Whatever works, I suppose."

Lark's cheeks were flushed. "Y-You really don't have to do that, Brook," She stammered. "I'm doing fine. Your problems are a bigger deal than mine, anyways."

"Bah! Not to me. Your problems are just as big of a deal as mine, Lark," She replied.

Lark opened her mouth to argue, but was quickly cut off by a knock on the door. Brook turned her attention to the door - what was it *now*?

"Who is it?"

"It's Foxglove, commander!"

Brook inhaled sharply, already guessing who it was likely about. "Come in."

Foxglove opened the door to reveal two young Wingwatcher apprentices - apprentices who Brook immediately recognised to be Daffodil and Violet. Foxglove had an expression of pure exasperation on her face, glaring at nothing. Daffodil had her arms crossed, pouting - Violet simply looked irked, refusing to meet anyone else's gaze. *What did they do now?*

"These two decided to try and sneak off so they could join one of the surface patrols. You can imagine the struggle it was to get them back in Valor in one piece."

Daffodil huffed. "It's not *our* fault that we mistook which patrol it was!" Violet immediately buried her face with her palms, groaning.

Brook let out a long sigh, lightly shaking her head. "Foxglove? Make sure you assign someone to watch these two when we head to the ruins."

She began gesturing for the two to the head out of the office, still vaguely annoyed. "Alright, you two can leave." The apprentices quickly left, immediately bickering with each other on their way out. Foxglove exhaled deeply once they were out of earshot. "Are you going to punish them?"

"Foxglove, those two are a rare breed of Wingwatcher apprentice. In that punishment does not deter them, it only makes them disregard rules even more." Brook grimaced. "And you know how I feel about punishing apprentices."

Foxglove gave a disgruntled shrug, but didn't argue. "So who should watch them, then?"

*Well, I can say with certainty that it won't be you or me,* Brook wanted to say, but the look on Foxglove's face told her that stating the obvious was not going to put her in a better mood. "Tell me, who do you plan taking with us for the patrol?"

"I was thinking of taking Wintersweet, Yarrow, and Squirrel,"

Foxglove answered. "Wintersweet and Yarrow work well together and Squirrel because I'm pretty sure Pine's still at the ruins. It'll probably cheer Squirrel up a bit, too."

"Surprisingly thoughtful of you." Brook raised an eyebrow at her. "I genuinely thought you were going to drag Chipmunk along just to spite him, though. Seems right up your alley."

Foxglove shook her head and laughed. "No, we both know how he is on daylight patrols - he's generally better at the night missions, anyways. I'm perfectly fine with letting him spend time with his girlfriend for the day, no matter how fun picking on him sounds."

Brook snorted. "Try not to take *too* much pleasure in teasing Chipmunk when you do it again."

"I'll try," Foxglove joked, rolling her eyes.

Tipping her head to the side, Brook shrugged. "Back to the matter at hand...if that's the case, then I can assign Holly or Parsley to watch them, if that's alright with you." *I mean, it's alright with me. I'd hope both of them have the common sense to know how to at least keep an eye on two fourteen-year-olds, no matter how difficult they might be.*

Foxglove frowned. "But Holly? *Really*?"

"Do you have that little faith in your sister, Foxglove?" Brook teased, earning another eyeroll from Foxglove. "I'm sure even Holly can handle that kind of responsibility. She knows how to handle the younger apprentices fairly well, and you have to admit she does have more experience than you. But because I know you'll complain, I'll assign Holly *and* Parsley to watch them. Deal?"

Somewhat amused, Foxglove nodded. "Deal. Thanks, commander." As she left, Lark let out a few quiet laughs.

She raised an eyebrow at Brook. "You really are close to all the other Wingwatchers, aren't you?"

"Well, not all of them, but...yeah. They're like a second family to me. I wouldn't trade the world for a better team to work with," Brook confessed.

Lark smiled. "That's sweet." Brook felt her cheeks heating up in response - the best she could do was muster up an awkward smile in return. "Brook? If you want to focus more on your Wingwatcher tasks, I'd be glad to help out with your lord duties, if you'd like. I know you love being the Wingwatcher commander more than being the lord of Valor."

"Really? That's great! Cause, uh...I have a favour to ask of you."

"Brook, I'm not going to do your paperwork for you," Lark replied with a teasing smirk.

"Well, it was worth a shot," Brook laughed. "But in all seriousness, I was hoping that you could take the lead of the reconsealing of the tunnel nearby the old village for the next few days? I have to head to there for a bit and I'm not sure how long I'll be gone. A few days at most, I'm hoping."

Lark blinked in surprise. "Uh...you want *me* to take over something like that? Are you sure?"

Grinning at her, Brook reached across her desk, placing her hand on top of Lark's. "Hey, don't doubt yourself. You have some of the most brilliant ideas to improve Valor and are great at leading these sorts of things. You'll be just fine."

"R-Really? Well, if you say so...I guess I can try," Lark giggled, her cheeks flushed. Brook's smile spread wider, laughing in response. *I think I might enjoy spending time with Lark more than I thought I would.*

# Chapter 7: Wren

**WREN**

"You're sure?" Wren asked, glancing behind her shoulders. They were simply walking through the mountain range, as Wren didn't want to push Sky further.

Sky nodded. "They looked exactly how you described them a while back. The porcupine armour and all."

Ivy, who was lightly dozing off on Sky's back, grimaced. "That sounds...very worrying. What does the Indestructible City want with *us*, anyways?"

Wren sighed. "I don't know, but whatever it is, I refuse to cooperate. Doubt it's anything good, mind you."

"On the bright side, we travel mainly by flight. So it'd probably take them a while before they catch up," Leaf chimed in. He was walking alongside Wren, his body somewhat tense. "I'm trying to be optimistic about this, though."

"I guess, but...I don't like it." Ivy closed her eyes as she laid back down. "It reminds me too much of the Wingwatcher arrests."

*Well, I hope you get sleep this time around,* Wren wanted to say, but she wasn't entirely sure if it was the best to bring that back up again. She didn't particularly want to ruminate on it longer than she had to, and she was pretty sure Ivy was still upset with her for earlier. Instead she let out another sigh, not commenting on it.

Sky frowned. "You aren't wrong, but I don't fly all day. My wings would be pretty sore by afternoon if I did that, I think."

Leaf shrugged. "I'm just saying that I think it'll take the soldiers awhile to catch up since...you know. You can fly and they can't."

"I suppose so," Sky replied. Wren gently patted his shoulder, or at

least, reached for it.

"Don't worry Sky, you can fly as long as you feel comfortable doing it. I don't want you to feel forced to do it." Sky smiled back at her in response. She turned to Leaf, smirking at him. "And we'll try to keep you in mind while flying, Leaf."

Leaf didn't say anything, but he rolled his eyes at her in amusement. Wren laughed to herself. *I missed teasing Leaf like this.*

"Wren?" Ivy's voice took Wren by surprise. She looked at Ivy, raising an eyebrow. "Do you think we'll make any stops on the way to the old village?"

Wren shrugged. "Well, there is that huge river past the mountains that I've wanted to check out for a while now. I vaguely remember seeing some mountain dragons and desert dragons in that area, but that was a while ago."

Ivy immediately perked up. "There might be dragons living over there? Can we go see? *Please*?"

Leaf's expression was something of a frown. "Ivy, are you *sure* that's a safe idea?"

"I'm sure it's perfectly safe as long as it's not just me going to check!" Ivy argued, pouting. Begrudgingly, she added, "But if it makes you feel any better, I'll keep my distance."

"So you promise to avoid riding the first dragon you see?" Leaf prompted, raising an eyebrow. Ivy snorted, nodding as she laughed.

Wren joined in her laughter. "Sure, we can go see when we get there."

Ivy giggled, her smile bright. "Thanks, Wren."

...

They had been nearing the river by now, and Ivy had gotten off of Sky's back solely due to her practically vibrating with excitement. She was walking by Wren's side, talking Wren's ears off about her

speculations and dragons. Wren honestly didn't mind it, and had even added her own thoughts when Ivy took a breath in between her rambling - it helped pass the time, and it was refreshing to talk with someone who also loved dragons.

Once Ivy paused for a moment, Leaf jumped in. "Ivy, I don't think we've even reached the river yet."

Ivy rolled her eyes, though she was still beaming. "Close enough!"

He didn't respond, instead turning to Wren. "I could've sworn she was just about to fall asleep minutes ago." Wren couldn't help but let out an amused chortle.

Ivy huffed upon overhearing. "You both should know this about me, though!"

"She does have a point, though," Wren said after recovering from her fit of laughter. "Dragons are exciting to be around. It's only reasonable that someone would perk up at the mention of one."

"If fate exists, it must really enjoy seeing me travel with people who share the most dangerous of interests," Leaf joked. Ivy didn't seem to be paying attention to him, or at least didn't find it that funny - Wren was entertained.

Wren shrugged. "I don't know if it's always dangerous, though...I mean, not all dragons are dangerous, right?"

Sky glanced at her. "Wren, I know what you're implying and I don't think I like it."

Gently patting his talon, Wren held back some laughter. "We all know this about you, though."

"Aw, Wren. Give him some credit," Leaf replied, smirking. "An army of snails could be terrifying in its own right."

"Ooh, add some kittens and turtles to the mix and you'll smother your enemies with cuteness!" Ivy cried.

Sky scoffed, but was laughing with them. "I'm being patronised," He

joked, rolling his eyes.

Wren lightly patted his talons. "In all seriousness, you're still the loveliest and most adorable dragon that any of us could've met, and we wouldn't change a thing about you."

He smiled back. "Aw, and you're the loveliest pet a dragon could have."

Amused, she barked back, "I am *not* a pet-"

"Oh, look!" Ivy interrupted. "The river's really close!" She turned to Wren. "Could we go see now?"

Sighing, Wren nodded. "I suppose we could check it out now. But I'd rather scout ahead first, just in case. Ivy, you can come with me because somehow, I doubt Leaf and Sky are physically capable of keeping you from charging over to the river."

Ivy let out a snort of laughter. "True."

Leaf frowned. "What about us?"

"Leaf, we're just scouting ahead in case there's something that we want to avoid so we can leave immediately. I think you and Sky can handle a couple of minutes without me," Wren answered. *Or at least, I hope so.*

He glanced briefly at Ivy and grimaced, but didn't argue. "Alright, but if anything happens to either of you-"

Ivy took Leaf's hands in her own. "Leaf, I promise that you don't need to worry about us. Besides, Wren's coming with me. She knows what she's doing!" Wren let out an awkward laugh in reply as Leaf's gaze trailed over to her. *I can't tell if she actually thinks that or if she's just trying to be extremely optimistic for his sake.*

"Well, I would hope she does," He sighed, breaking away from Ivy. "Just be careful?"

"By the moons, stop Leaf!" Wren chuckled. "Ivy will be perfectly safe with me, and I will make sure she doesn't run up to any dragons we

might see." She lightly patted his shoulder. "But if it makes you feel any better, we'll be as careful as possible."

Leaf didn't seem entirely convinced, but he accepted the answer - or at least, that's what Wren assumed the small smile on his face meant.

Sky turned to him, grinning. "Ooh, we could go looking for snails while waiting for them!" Leaf seemed impartial to the idea, simply shrugging.

Wren chuckled lightly. "You guys have fun, then. We shouldn't be gone too long, anyways."

"Wait, we're going now? Great!" Ivy gave Leaf and Sky a small wave before walking in the direction of the river.

*That didn't mean "we're going now"*- Wren didn't say it out loud, though - Ivy was already a little farther along and frankly, she doubted correcting Ivy would matter at this point. Quickly catching up to Ivy, she resisted the urge to shoot Ivy an irritated glare. *As long as I'm able to keep an eye on her, it should be fine.*

Ivy noticed Wren walking beside her. "Wren, isn't this exciting- oh." Her expression faltered upon seeing Wren's face. "Sorry about rushing off like that."

"It's fine," Wren sighed, shaking her head. "Let's just keep going until we find a decent spot to look and see from a distance."

"What if we climbed a tree? We'd be able to see more from a better perspective," Ivy suggested, tilting her head.

Wren raised an eyebrow at her. "That...could work, actually. And it might save us some time."

She looked around, spotting a small cluster of trees to their right. There wasn't all that many, but it appeared to be where part of the river led into - to their left the river continued to stretch out. *Well, we are still sort of close to the mountain range, so seeing some forest area shouldn't be all that surprising.*

Ivy also seemed to pick up on it. "You wanna try climbing one of those? Or should I do it?" Wren could tell she was attempting to be teasing - if it weren't for the tone of her voice, then it was definitely the smirk on her face. *Well...she is trying, so I guess I can't fault her for that.*

"If you want to," Wren replied, smiling back at her. "As long as you're careful about it, that is."

"Hmm, alright! I'll go ahead." Before Wren could say anything, Ivy shot off once again. *Is she always like this?* She didn't bother calling after Ivy, however - she didn't want to draw too much attention to either of them, plus, she found Ivy's excitement sort of endearing.

*Well, in a "you're really pushing it but it's somehow still cute" kind of endearing, if anything.*

Once Wren reached Ivy, she was surprised to find Ivy already beginning to climb one of the trees. Ivy glanced down at Wren, laughing awkwardly, an apologetic smile on her face. Wren sighed once more, climbing up to her branch.

She awkwardly shifted closer to Ivy. "See anything?"

Ivy shook her head. "Nope. I think I'll climb a little higher and see if the view gets any better."

Wren raised an eyebrow. "Okay, but don't fall. Something tells me that it'd be unpleasant for us both." *And Leaf would lose it if he found out-*

Ivy only laughed in response, hauling herself up to another branch. She remained on her own branch, lightly scratching her arms as the pine needles brushed against her skin. Wren wasn't sure how much energy Ivy had gained just from being told that there could *possibly* be dragons in the area, but it was already beginning to tire her out. *Or maybe it's because there's no way to get her to contain her excitement. At least, there's no way that I'm aware of...*

*If it does turn out that there's some dragons over there, Ivy and I are going to have a little chat about safety. And caution. And not running*

*off every five seconds even though I said DON'T.*

Getting lost in her own thoughts turned out to be a bad idea, since Ivy's excited squeal almost caused Wren to lose her grip on her branch. Before Wren could reprimand her, Ivy had already began climbing back down, which Wren thought was the most careful Ivy had been the entire day. Soon Ivy reached the branch with relative ease. Ivy took Wren's hands in her own, her whole body radiating excitement.

"Wren, guess what I saw?" Ivy didn't even wait for Wren's answer. "There's a whole *town* by the river! Of *dragons*! I didn't expect to find something *this* amazing!" *A whole town? Hmm.* Wren didn't know there was another dragon town close by - the only one she really knew of was the one where Sky had gotten dragon-napped. *I need to find my map and add this place to it, then.*

Wren gently nudged her shoulder. "Hey, don't explode with excitement, alright? We want you to make it back to the others in one piece."

Ivy chuckled breezily. "Aww. I'll try not to, since you asked politely." She took another glance over her shoulder, still beaming. "Did you know this place existed, Wren?"

Letting go of Ivy's hands, Wren shook her head. "No. I'll have to add it to my map."

"Wait, so if you've never been there...and you didn't know this place existed...did we just discover a whole new dragon settlement?" Her eyes went wide with excitement. "This is one of the best days of my life!"

Raising an eyebrow, Wren laughed softly. "Oh? What are the others?"

"Well, there's a lot! I can't name them all now!" Ivy huffed, crossing her arms. "But...meeting you and Sky and riding the golden dragon are some of them."

Wren tried to ignore the heat rising in her cheeks. She wasn't sure

how meeting her and Sky was one of Ivy's best days at first, but thinking on it, it did make more sense. Since it was Ivy, after all. *But still.*

Ivy hummed quietly to herself. "Hmm. Could we...visit the town, maybe? Please?"

*Visiting the dragon town? After what happened last time? Oh no, absolutely not-* Wren really hoped her face hadn't given away how she felt about the suggestion, but Ivy just frowned after taking another glance at Wren.

"I- look, Ivy. Please don't take it personally, alright? I just don't want something to happen to Sky again. He got dragon-napped the last time he went into a dragon city, and I...I don't think I'd be able to handle it if it happened again."

Ivy gave her an understanding smile. "Okay. What if we all went in this time? As a group." She looked down at the branch. "But if you don't want to go, I don't want to force you. I think I could convince Leaf to let me go..."

Wren snorted. "I don't think we have ten years on our hands, Ivy."

She scoffed. "I'm sure he won't be *that* hard to convince!"

"I'm wishing you all the patience and luck in the world, then." Wren then sighed, shrugging. "If we all go in a group *and* you promise not to run off during the entire time, then we can go check it out."

"*Really*?! We're going? Yes!" Ivy immediately jumped down from the branch - though she actually waited for Wren this time, which Wren thought was already an improvement. "I can't wait to tell Leaf and Sky!"

Wren climbed down the trunk, grunting. "Don't bombard them with information, though! We don't want them getting overwhelmed."

Ivy snickered, lightly shoving Wren. "I can't make any promises on that."

The two walked back in the direction they had came from, not

talking much for the rest of the walk. Wren had occasionally glanced at Ivy, but did so in a discreet manner. *Is she still upset with me for earlier?* Ivy still seemed filled to the brim with excitement, already anticipating sharing their discovery with the others. *I don't think she is right now, but...*

"Hey, Ivy?"

"Yeah?"

Wren grimaced. How should she word this? "You seem a lot more...cheerful right now. I was just wondering if uh...you were still upset with me for earlier?"

Ivy sighed. "Well, kind of. But not really. I do forgive you for it, though." She shrugged. "Maybe we should...try to avoid talking about my dad for the time being, alright? And talk about something else? Hopefully something less...touchy."

"That's fine by me," Wren exhaled. She smiled awkwardly at Ivy. "So, um. Friends? Friends-ish? I don't know what we are, but you want to be that again?"

Ivy returned the awkward smile. "I'd like that. Friends sounds nice."

The rest of the walk was filled with light, friendly chatter, though Wren couldn't help but warily check the deep blue skies for any dragons every so often. Regardless, Wren couldn't help but feel warm from head to toe as she walked next to Ivy.

# Chapter 8: Leaf

***brief a/n: Pyrrhia's geography can be so confusing at times and the wiki was no help when writing this (had misleading information at the time i believe). this gets worked around later but please keep this in mind as i had to use the wiki for information since the book was unclear, and the wiki was very wrong when it said that Sky got captured at the Scorpion Den.***

***and another note - i did some slight edits to this one at the very end so Wren's next chapter makes a bit more sense.***

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**LEAF**

Leaf still thought that leaving Ivy and Wren on their lonesome was an awful idea, especially Ivy - Wren could handle being on her own, but Leaf somehow doubted Ivy was capable of that. It had been lingering on his mind since they left, and had stayed there the entire time they had been gone. Wren would probably tell him that he's overreacting and worrying too much, but he couldn't help it.

*I know Ivy said they'd be fine, but...I just really hope they do know what they're doing.*

As he continued to get lost in his own thoughts, Sky's voice caught his attention.

"Leaf! Come here!"

*What is it this time?* He trudged over to where Sky stood, his hands in his trouser's pockets. Of course, it didn't take a genius to figure out - it was probably another snail. Leaf wasn't exactly sure *what* Sky found so alluring about snails and similar animals, but it was an interesting way to pass the time while waiting for Wren and Ivy, it turned out.

Leaf raised an eyebrow at the snail slowly inching its way across the small branch. Sky simply stared at it in awe, his smile wide. *I still find it weird that a dragon can be just as fascinated with animals like humans can,* He thought briefly, before shaking it away. *I shouldn't think like that...especially when Wren is around.*

He sighed inwardly. *Glad I didn't let that one slip.*

"So...you just watch the snail?" He asked, hoping his tone didn't sound to judging.

Sky nodded. "Yep! Aren't they amazing?"

Leaf shrugged. "I suppose." He remained silent for a bit longer, his gaze still on the snail - it was now munching on one of the leaves on the edge of the branch. "Don't you ever get bored of just watching them, though?"

Shaking his head, Sky blinked slowly at the snail. "No. Don't you find it hard to get bored of doing something you love?"

"Well...yes. I guess you have a point," Leaf conceded. *The only thing I guess I really "loved" doing was training to become a dragonslayer...but that's not my goal. Not any more.*

*Hmm. Perhaps I should expand my horizons a bit more.*

Leaf continued to watch the snail, his arms folded - he still couldn't find what was so interesting about it, but it was relaxing, in a way. *Aside from the fact that Ivy and Wren might get eaten while they're out scouting ahead, and-*

His thoughts were cut off by the sound of footsteps and faint laughter - he turned around to see Ivy and Wren walking towards them, chatting merrily. Sky also seemed to notice, his ears immediately pricking up. Ivy rushed over to Leaf, a wide grin on her face.

"Leaf, guess what we found? A whole dragon city! Isn't that *amazing*?" She asked, her hands shivering with excitement.

He let out a small, wary chuckle. "That's great, Ivy."

Ivy nodded. "And Wren said we can go explore it if I don't go running off! Aren't you excited?"

Leaf gave her an awkward smile, unsure how to answer. *Going inside of a dragon city for no good reason? No, Ivy, I am the exact opposite of excited.* He wasn't going to say that out loud, though. Ivy looked genuinely pleased with herself at the moment, and he didn't want to bring down her mood. Wren seemed to pick up on it too - the stare she gave him spoke for itself.

"In a way, I guess," He replied. Ivy seemed baffled by his response, but he turned to Wren before she could ask what he meant. "...so how exactly do you plan to keep Ivy from running off?"

Wren remained quiet for a moment. "I'll think of something."

Ivy placed her hands on her hips, huffing. "I'm *right here*. I'll have you both know that I'm perfectly capable of containing my excitement!"

Leaf arched an eyebrow at her. "Are you, though?"

Ivy was about to respond, but thought better of it, instead refusing to meet Leaf's gaze. *I...probably could have said that a lot better.*

*Or not say it at all,* spoke the little voice inside his head. He wanted to apologise, but it was clear that Ivy wasn't in the mood to listen - or at least, that's what it looked like. Leaf only sighed, lightly kicking a nearby pebble.

Wren glanced up at Sky. "So...you guys find any snails while we were gone?"

Sky brightened up. "Yes! We found this little guy right here." *'We'? I think that was you...* He gestured to the snail with his talon. "Isn't it adorable?"

Laughing, Wren nodded. "It is. Not as adorable as you, of course."

He shared her laughter, smiling back at her. "So...you guys are planning to go to that dragon city? You aren't planning on going in by yourselves, are you?"

"Well...no." The look on Wren's face told Leaf another story, her expression an awkward grimace - he knew she was referring to Sky specifically. *I mean, that makes sense. Weren't she and Sky escaping from a dragon palace because he got dragon-napped, or something like that?* He couldn't blame her for being reluctant to let Sky come with.

Ivy gently rubbed Wren's back. "Aww, Wren. I'm sure if we all stick together, nothing bad will happen." Wren seemed unconvinced, but Ivy's words seemed to get her to relax a bit. Leaf found it a bit odd, but didn't comment on it. *It would make sense if they got closer while they were out scouting.*

Sky's gaze on Wren softened. "Wren, are you...are you scared that I might get taken again? Is that what this is all about?"

Wren crossed her arms, glancing away. "I...yeah. I guess it's really stupid to worry about, since we're all going in, but..." She looked like she was fighting back tears. "You're still my baby dragon. If something happened to you because I was being careless, then-"

She sighed, rubbing her eyes. Wren didn't say much else, avoiding everyone's gaze. Sky came over to her, gently nudging her. Ivy also slung her other arm around Wren. Leaf was hesitant at first but joined them, also hugging Wren. Wren let out a quiet sniff, though a smile began to spread on her face.

Sky pulled back, returning her gesture. "Wren, we'll be as careful as possible, alright? Just for you."

Wren wiped away another tear, laughing. "You don't need to do that with me around!" She placed her hand on top of Ivy's arm. "But seriously, thanks. It means a lot."

Ivy's smile grew. "Glad we could help! Please don't be worried about opening up to us about this, if you feel comfortable with it."

Leaf wasn't sure if it was Ivy just being nice or if she was hoping Wren would open up to them more often, but Wren didn't seem to mind it either way. *And honestly...I do hope she does open up to us more.*

"I'll be sure to keep that in mind," Wren eventually replied. She glanced back at the city. "For now...let's just head to the city."

...

Leaf was trying to calm his nerves as they walked towards the town, but it was becoming a waste of energy to do so. He was sitting on Sky's back, hopefully situated in a place where he wouldn't be easily spotted (according to Wren, anyways). Wren and Ivy were sitting closer to Sky's shoulders - Leaf couldn't understand why they would want to, though.

*I mean, it isn't me up there, so I suppose that's better...but I still don't like the fact that Ivy is up there.* He supposed it was safe since Wren was with her, but...it didn't make him feel any better about the fact that they were more out in the open, *and* that they took an even higher position to settle on. The two were already chatting quietly - Leaf was barely able to hear them.

Ivy's eyes were wide with amazement once Wren finished speaking. "So that's what hearing Dragon up close is like! That's...*incredible*." Leaf pursed his lips. *It'd be nice if someone took that much interest in my abilities, but...that's probably just Ivy being Ivy.*

Wren grinned awkwardly. "I knew you'd think so. Honestly, I'm more surprised it took you this long to bring it up."

"I guess I'm sort of predictable, heh," Ivy replied, smothering a giggle. "So what's it like, speaking Dragon? Does it feel any different from speaking our language, or does it feel the same?"

Wren blinked in surprise, apparently not expecting that question - but she didn't seem to mind, and even seemed intrigued by some of Ivy's questions. She managed to answer most of the questions, though Leaf could tell that she was unsure how to answer most of them, if not all. Once Ivy went quiet, Wren let out a sigh.

She let out a snort of laughter. "Keeping up with all your questions is kind of hard, I'll admit. But those are good questions, I don't think I know some of them myself." She was quiet for a moment, then asked, "How does learning Dragon sound?"

The look on Ivy's face told Leaf everything he needed to know - the way her eyes and nose crinkled, the wide grin on her face, the way her hands seemed to be quivering...Leaf would've bet that if they weren't in a dragon settlement, Ivy would've let out a thrilled squeal.

"I'll take that as a yes," Wren joked, raising an eyebrow. Ivy's only response was a few giggles, a hint of a blush in her cheeks.

Leaf turned away from them - he wasn't particularly interested in hearing the rest of their conversation, as he could already tell where it was going. His gaze flickered to their surroundings - a few other dragons were making their own way across the streets, but didn't seem to pay much attention to Sky, or the fact that he had three humans sitting on his back. *Or maybe it's just that we're hardly noticeable. ...I'm fine with that.*

Though he was practicing, Leaf still found it hard to decipher dragon expressions. But even he could tell that some of the passersby had been giving them strange looks. The odd stares made him think otherwise, that they were really that noticeable - though it seemed more likely that they had just thought Sky's scale colours looked odd, for a mountain dragon. Either way, he found it bothersome.

The streets grew more crowded as they continued walking throughout the town. Leaf could feel his heartbeat racing - now he *really* wished that Ivy hadn't asked to head directly into the town. Instead he simply tried to steel his nerves, attempting to push away his worries. It wasn't much of a help, however - his palms were now beginning to sweat. He had to wipe his hands off on his pants every so often so he could maintain his grip.

*I can do this,* he desperately reminded himself. *It's just a short walk.* As he clung on, his gaze inadvertently landed on the ground several feet below him.

And the corners of his eyes began to blur.

# Chapter 9: Rowan

**ROWAN**

"So what do you guys plan on naming the town?"

"I don't know."

"How long will it take to build the town?"

"I don't know that, either."

"...is it safe to assume you guys don't know what you're doing?"

Rowan wasn't sure how much more of Bluebell's questions she could handle. She was half tempted to start ignoring her, which Rowan knew far too well that Bluebell would call her out for - her other option was just to tell Bluebell to wait until they met up with Grove and the others, which Bluebell wasn't going to do, from past experiences. Instead Rowan only groaned, glancing back at Bluebell.

"We'll figure things out once we group up."

Bluebell sighed expressively. "Isn't that just your fancy way of saying 'I don't know'? It's okay, you can tell me. I won't judge you - well, maybe a little bit."

Rowan resisted the urge to snap at Bluebell and inhaled sharply, still walking along the path. Bluebell seemed to notice, now staying quiet. *That...is a development, I suppose. I can work with this.* She couldn't help but feel a smidge bad, but attempted to shrug it off. Apologising would just lead to more questions from Bluebell, and Rowan wasn't in the mood to answer things that they *both* knew that Rowan had no answer to.

The rest of the walk was silent, much to Rowan's relief and...guilt, was it? She wasn't entirely sure. Soon enough, they finally reached the entrance to Talisman - and as Rowan expected, the others were

waiting for them. With them she spotted both Mallow...and Camellia? *What did they bribe her with to convince her to help?* Before Rowan could say anything, Cranberry came rushing over to her, almost tackling Rowan to the ground.

"Cran-" Rowan yelped, though her shock was quickly drowned out by her own laughter. Cranberry pulled back, giggling as well.

She tilted her head. "Feeling any better?"

Rowan shrugged. "Not by much."

Cranberry was about to say something else, but she took one glance at the smirk on Bluebell's face and grumbled something Rowan couldn't quite catch, her cheeks flushing. Rowan felt her own face heating up, but didn't comment on it. Grove walked over to them, chuckling as well.

"Glad you're doing a little better," He replied, his voice soft. Rowan only blushed in response, unable to hold back a smile. "We managed to convince Camellia and Mallow to help, despite Camellia being...well, Camellia-"

"*Excuse me*? I never agreed to help!" Camellia snapped, marching up to Grove. "I only agreed because I wanted to give *someone* here a piece of my mind!"

Thyme blinked quizzically at her. "But we asked if you would like to help us build our new village..."

Camellia whipped her head around to glare at him. "If I wanted to hear your opinion, I would've asked!"

Grimacing, Thyme avoided her gaze. "I was just saying."

Camellia shot one more venomous glare at him before turning back to Rowan. "Anyways. *You.*"

Cranberry looked as if she was about to slap Camellia into the dirt. "You touch Rowan, and I'll-"

"Cran, don't. Its inevitable, anyways," Rowan sighed, placing her

hand on Cranberry's shoulder. "What is it, Camellia?"

"You know very well what it is! You know, the lying to us for several years about Wren? Our *sister*? I can't believe you!" Camellia stopped briefly to catch her breath, huffing rather heavily. "I knew you never cared about us much, but to hide something so important like this? *Inexcusable*."

Rowan was barely able to hold Camellia's gaze. "I do care about you all," She managed to choke out. "I just..."

Camellia scoffed. "You just what? Couldn't trust us with something like this? Because you should know that I wouldn't spread anything of the sort to the other villagers! We could've helped you, Rowan! Don't you understand that?"

Mallow walked over to Camellia, sighing. "I hate to say it, but...she does have a point, Rowan." She glanced up at Rowan. "You've always been distant from us, but you should've known that Camellia and I would be willing to help you."

Cranberry let out a quiet snort. "Imagine Camellia wanting to help someone other than herself. She certainly seems to be in the helping mood right now."

"*Cranberry*," Rowan warned, though she knew there was no use. *Cranberry just isn't going to leave it be, even after whatever happens today...*

Bluebell grimaced at Mallow. "*Camellia*? Willing to help? Something isn't adding up here."

Camellia glowered Bluebell intensely. "*Shut it.*"

Before Camellia could get any more words in, Grove stepped in between her and Rowan. He scowled at her.

"You either come with us to help build our town, or stay here. Yelling at Rowan is *not* an option."

"I was not-" Camellia began, but one look at Cranberry's harsh stare immediately made her go silent. "Fine. I'll help you build your town

or whatever. I'm sure it'll be better than staying in this dump, anyways."

She didn't wait for his answer, instead pushing past Rowan and stomping ahead. Mallow only gave Grove and Rowan an apologetic frown, rushing after her. Thyme trudged over to Rowan, glaring at Camellia.

He scoffed at her. "The audacity she has, sheesh...I get why you don't like her much, Rowan."

Rowan didn't look at him. "I...it's fine, Thyme. She does have some points." *Well, mostly Mallow, but...*

Cranberry rolled her eyes. "Don't let her get to you. For now let's just make sure they don't get themselves hurt."

...

It had been a couple of minutes since they had chased after Camellia and Mallow - Camellia just barely seemed to calm down, or at least enough to avoid lashing out at Rowan every five seconds. *It's useless to hope she'll just give up on it. She's too stubborn for that and we all know it.* For the time being, they decided to build a few shelters for them. Rowan held her doubts that it was the best plan, but she wasn't in the mood to argue - not to mention, she didn't want to be out in the open if it happened to rain, so she supposed it was better than nothing.

Cranberry frowned at the pile of sticks she, Rowan, and Bluebell had gathered. "I still don't get how we'll make anything suitable for *one* person, let alone *seven*."

"Grove probably knows what he's doing," Rowan reminded her, though it was also a reminder for herself.

Bluebell snorted. "Yeah, *you* would say that."

Rowan glared at her, her cheeks flushing. "He had to help his father build their farm back in Talisman! It's only natural to assume he knows what he's doing."

The only response from Cranberry was a few muffled laughs. Rowan rolled her eyes, though she couldn't help but grin while doing so. *Oh well. At least it's something to laugh about in the meanwhile.* Bluebell joined her laughter for a brief moment before stretching her arms, yawning.

"I wonder what Camellia's even doing," She mumbled absentmindedly. "I bet she's arguing that she shouldn't be forced to work because she's 'above these kinds of menial tasks' or some shit like that."

Rowan blinked in surprise. "I was not expecting a swear to come out of your mouth, of all people."

Bluebell shrugged. "Blame mom and dad."

Rowan could already feel her muscles tensing at the implications that statement had. Cranberry gently pat Rowan's back, her expression unreadable. Though Rowan normally would've flinched at the touch if it was anyone else, she simply accepted it - if Bluebell wasn't there, Rowan probably would've leaned onto Cranberry's shoulder for more comfort.

Cranberry frowned. "That is true, though. It's been pretty quiet for the past couple of minutes. Should we be concerned?"

Bluebell held in another snort of laughter. "Probably."

"Well, we might as well go check, right? Besides, Grove is probably waiting for us to return by now." Rowan grabbed a few sticks, gesturing for Cranberry and Bluebell to do the same.

As they made their way back to the others, Rowan couldn't help but worry about how the others were handling Camellia, now that Bluebell had mentioned her. In all honesty, Rowan still wasn't sure what to think of the fact that Camellia was still with them. *She gets bored of things really easily. I'm surprised she didn't lose interest the moment Grove told her that 'yelling at me' wasn't an option.* If Rowan had to guess, Camellia was probably arguing with Grove or Thyme by now. *Or best case scenario, she's arguing with BOTH...*

Once they reached the rest of the group, Rowan hoped that nothing too out of hand had happened while they were gone. The looks on their faces said otherwise - she scanned the small clearing for Camellia. Surprisingly enough, she wasn't snapping at Grove or Thyme - rather, she looked as if she was about to *start* yelling at someone. *Oh well. A quiet Camellia is the best Camellia.*

That aside, Camellia was standing next to Grove and Thyme, a look of disapproval on her face. Grove soon noticed Rowan, rushing over to her.

He let out a sigh of relief. "You guys are back sooner than expected."

"Yeah, well we couldn't leave you guys with Camellia too long. That sounds like a strain on your health," Rowan joked, keeping her laughter quiet so Camellia wouldn't hear. "What happened?"

Grove took the sticks out of her arms. "I- well...you'll see for yourself." He glanced at the sticks in Cranberry's arms, grinning. "Thanks, with these I can probably get started on something."

Bluebell scoffed. "What, no thanks for me? Hmph."

Cranberry playfully jabbed her with a stick. "Oh, hush. I'm sure it was for you too." Bluebell giggled, lightly jabbing her back. Cranberry turned to Grove, smiling. "You're welcome, though! I can go back out and get some more if you want."

He blinked in surprise, then shook his head. "Nah, I asked Thyme and Camellia to get some extra wood just in case." *Thyme and Camellia? Is that even safe?* Grove gently nudged her shoulder, albeit awkwardly due to the sticks in his arms. "Besides, I also want to spend more time with you. It's not like it's going to get easier from here."

Rowan held back a sigh. *He's not wrong,* She thought, feeling a pang of disappointment. *Building a town is going to be so time consuming.* She almost wished that Wren and Leaf and their friends were still there to help them. *Almost.*

"Yeah, I know..." Cranberry mumbled, shrugging. She hesitated briefly, but took Rowan's hand. "We should go check out what they found for now, alright?"

"Alright."

Rowan simply let Cranberry take the lead as they walked over. Of course, there was no real need to, but it did make Rowan feel the tiniest bit better. Thyme stepped aside once he saw the two, surprised. Camellia just huffed, crossing her arms. In front of them was a boy with slightly worn down clothing - he looked like he was around Leaf's age, Rowan wanted to guess. He had poorly kept short, dark brown hair and wary light brown eyes that darted around the small clearing.

*It's Tadpole,* Rowan realised with a jolt. The same dragonmancer apprentice who was ordered to take Grove to be sacrificed.

Camellia narrowed her eyes. "We found this little pest following us back to Grove and Mallow." She let out a groan - though Rowan thought it sounded more like a growl, if anything. "I bet he's spying on us for those dragonmancers."

Tadpole yelped, inching away from her. "I told you, I'm not!"

"Keep your mouth shut until I give you permission to speak!" She shot back, raising her fist - Thyme began to pull it back down before she could scare Tadpole any further. Camellia jerked her hand back, practically hissing at him. He only took a few steps back, vaguely terrified yet amused at the same time.

Rowan glared at them both. "*Enough*." She leaned into Cranberry's shoulder, her expression relaxing slightly. "Cranberry, do you want to handle this? After all, you are the mayor..."

Cranberry's gaze widened, taken off-guard. "I mean, I guess so now that you mention it?" She inhaled sharply as she turned to Tadpole. "What were you doing, following them?" Before waiting for his response, she immediately turned to Camellia. "To clarify, I'm asking *Tadpole*."

Rowan couldn't catch what Camellia said underneath her breath, and she honestly didn't want to know, judging from the look on Thyme's face. Tadpole took one last glance at Camellia before sighing.

"I-I overheard you guys talking to Camellia and Mallow about your new village. I want to help, if that's alright," He mumbled, unable to meet anyone's gaze.

Camellia scoffed. "He's probably lying. He *is* a dragonmancer apprentice, after all. I bet he wanted to be one, even! Why can't we just kick him back to Talisman?"

"Please don't!" He begged. "I don't want to go back to Talisman! Everyone there keeps giving me judgmental looks because I used to be an apprentice. I don't feel safe there. Can't I please stay with you guys?"

Rowan grimaced. *So they did do something about the dragonmancers? Impressive.* She couldn't help but feel slightly bad for Tadpole, though - would that have been the same case for Leaf if he stayed in Talisman? Or if any of her sisters were an apprentice? *Not that any of them would want to stay, but...* There was a part of her that wanted to help the poor kid out. After all, he was a former apprentice, just like Leaf.

*But he's the same apprentice who willingly followed Gorge's orders to arrest Grove,* She reminded herself. *He almost got us sacrificed.* Cranberry seemed to notice, if not for the hand she rested on Rowan's shoulder.

She sighed. "If you can prove you're trustworthy to us, then you can stay for as long as you'd like. But I'll admit...it will be hard for some of us to trust you fully. Your actions as a dragonmancer apprentice aren't the most forgettable."

"Thank you!" Tadpole cried, now beaming. "I promise I'll make it up to you guys!"

"Are you *kidding* me? He's obviously a spy!" Camellia spat. Before anyone could argue with her, she stormed off in the opposite

direction.

Cranberry glanced nervously at Rowan. "Did I do that right? It feels like I did awful."

Thyme nodded. "I think you did pretty good! Don't listen to her."

"Yeah," Rowan added. "Camellia's just being an-"

Cranberry laughed softly. "I get it, I get it! Thanks for the support, though."

An awkward silence loomed over everyone as Camellia didn't seem to be returning any time soon. *I guess I can understand why she's angry, but...why does she have to be so irritating about it? Moons...*

"So...anyone want to go fetch her?" Thyme coughed.

No one said anything until Mallow spoke up. "I can get her," She sighed. She glared at Thyme. "But you're coming with me, since you suggested it."

He grimaced. "Why?"

"I'm not going to face her by myself when she's in a mood!" Mallow protested. "Come on!"

Despite his grumbling, Thyme went along with her, following Camellia's trail. Rowan had to resist the urge to sigh once they left. How were they supposed to get anything done like this?

# Chapter 10: Brook

**BROOK**

It was the day for the patrol to the old ruins, and honestly? Brook had her doubts about how productive it would be already. They were going off the assumption that everyone who was banished was still alive. What if the effects of the Wingwatcher arrests were worse than she had initially imagined? There wasn't much of a way to tell.

*But I did make it official. And I am the one who proposed the idea...* There wasn't really a way to back out from it, even if Brook wanted to. *I...probably should've just stayed in Valor instead of going with...*

She made an attempt to push those worries aside, however - she was going to see if the others were alright, and wouldn't rest until she saw them for herself. Next to Brook's side was Lark, who seemed to be shivering slightly.

Brook raised an eyebrow. "You alright?"

Lark grimaced. "Yes, I am - well, I think I am, anyways..." She took another look at the blueprints and sighed. "You're really sure about letting me take over?"

"Lark, I trust that you'll do your best no matter what happens. I'm confident that everything will be fine," Brook assured her, smiling a little. She shrugged. "Besides, you've already ran a lot of helpful projects for Valor in the past. This won't be any different, I'm sure."

Lark only smiled back, laughing to herself. *Well, at least that seemed to ease her nerves.* Brook shared Lark's gaze briefly before turning back towards one of the exits closest to the ruins. After some more silence passed between the two, Lark spoke up once again.

"...so. Why are you even headed to the ruins in the first place?"

*Oooh, that's the kind of question I was hoping you* wouldn't *ask.* Of

course, Brook was more than willing to answer, but she was afraid that she wouldn't be able to hold onto her anger with Heath and keep it from taking over the conversation - she didn't particularly want to hurt Lark, and there was no time for Brook to complain about all the fine details, anyhow.

Brook grimaced. "That's where several of the banished have been hiding. For years now, if my memory serves me correctly."

Lark paused for a moment, a shocked yet relieved look on her face. "You mean...they aren't dead? I thought they had to be, living out on the surface like that..."

"No. Or at least, not all of them, if the last report I got about the ruins is true..." Brook kept her sights focused on the path ahead of her, still walking. "But thinking they were dead was probably something Heath could've settled for, if actual death didn't happen."

"I..." Lark was quiet for a moment. "I guess I can agree with that."

The rest of their walk was void of talk, much to Brook's concern. *Did I say the wrong thing to her? Probably.* She didn't have much time to dwell on it, though - she could ask Lark about it later. Nearby she caught sight of Holly, who was pacing within the tunnel corridors. Holly noticed Brook before she could say anything, letting out a sigh of relief.

"Commander, I'm so glad I found you!"

Brook narrowed her eyes - neither Parsley, Daffodil, or Violet was with her. *What happened to my order to keep an eye on those two?* "*Holly*."

Holly shrinked back at her tone. "I know what it might look like, but please hear me out-"

Lark placed a hand on Brook's shoulder - she exhaled deeply, trying her hardest to avoid sounding exasperated already. *It might be that Holly wasn't shirking her tasks this time. Don't assume too much.*

*Don't act like Heath would.*

"Go on."

Holly let out a brief sigh of relief before continuing. "I knew that you would be heading out soon, so I decided to find the kids you asked Parsley and I to watch. ...Only, I'm not sure where they are?"

Lark leaned into Brook's shoulder. "She means Daffodil and Violet, right?" Brook gave her a subtle nod - she let out a quiet groan of irritation. "Those girls really haven't changed at all."

"Well that's...not ideal. I had them confined to the caves before we left, so there shouldn't be any reason they'd be outside Valor. I made sure no one told them when we were heading out, either."

Shrugging, Holly frowned. "If that's the case, then I'm not all that worried. There's only so many exits to sneak out of Valor from."

Lark looked doubtful, but said nothing. *I'm guessing they aren't her favourite kids, huh?* Brook could recall Ivy constantly hanging out with Daffodil and Violet - she supposed it made sense that Lark wasn't particularly fond of them, their strong personalities considered.

Brook crossed her arms. "I suppose so. Where's Parsley?"

"She's probably searching for them, I can't imagine her slacking on the job. She's too much of a-" Holly stopped suddenly, growing quiet. "What's the word again? I forgot."

"I am *not* helping you insult Parsley," Brook reprimanded her, scoffing. "As long as you two keep them within Valor, I don't really care what you do. I can't risk losing any more apprentices." *Especially the really promising ones...*

Holly snorted. "Alright, alright! I'll try my best to make sure they stay in the caves. Good luck out on the surface, commander."

She rushed off, giving Brook a small wave as she left. Lark frowned.

"Aren't you worried about Daffodil and Violet making an attempt to sneak out right now? I wouldn't put it past those two..."

Brook thought for a moment, then shrugged. "Not really. There's only so many exits leading to the ruins." *Well, that and Violet's been trying her hardest to avoid everyone, even Daffodil.* Brook wanted to guess something had gone down between the two after getting caught, but she wasn't entirely sure. *Either way, if anything they'll just have to look out for Daffodil...*

Lark looked doubtful, but didn't argue. The rest of the walk was silent, up until they reached the small group of Wingwatchers, with Foxglove leaning against one of the tunnel's walls, waiting patiently. She perked up upon seeing Brook, as did a few of the others.

Foxglove glanced back at the patrol, then back at Brook. "I see you had a long walk." There was a small smirk on her face - Brook tried to ignore it to the best of her ability.

Lark cleared her throat briefly, grabbing Brook's attention. "Well, um...I guess you're leaving now, right?"

"Yes? I mean, I would hope so..."

"Good luck up there." Lark gave her an awkward, unsure smile. "And please don't die."

Brook laughed softly. "Aw, thanks. If I die, then make sure you yell at me for it, alright?"

Lark simply stared at Brook for a moment, unblinking. "If you were dead, how would I be able to yell at you? That makes no sense..."

Stifling a few more laughs, Brook nudged Lark's shoulder. "Oh, I'm sure you won't have to figure that out, anyways." Thinking her words over a bit more, she added, "And good luck to you too, not that you'll need it to handle this."

Lark scoffed, though the smile on her face said otherwise. She waved at Brook one last time before heading off in the direction of the damaged tunnel, muttering to herself. Brook held back a few chuckles, turning back to the group.

Foxglove sighed. "We should probably get going now. Right,

commander?"

Brook nodded, gesturing for the others to head out first. *I can only hope this turns out alright...*

...

It had been a few hours since they had set out, and already Brook was starting to regret coming along even more than she had initially. While for the most part, things seemed oddly alright on the surface (to Brook, anyways - she found the decreasing amount of dragons flying overhead odd). And no one on the patrol had started fighting - then again, it wasn't like Parsley was on the patrol, who often picked fights with Yarrow. *Foxglove really does know who can and can't be put together on a patrol.*

Still, she couldn't help but worry. What if something happened to her while she was out on the surface? Valor couldn't have that - *not again,* she told herself. *Valor won't lose its lord now. Or at least, it better not.* What would happen to Valor if it lost her now? Who would take her pace? *Would it technically be Forest? He is my only son...and only child, at that...*

*Moons above, I hope I made the right choice in going with this patrol.*

Squirrel was walking alongside Brook, while Foxglove took the lead. Behind her were Yarrow and Wintersweet, both of which seemed to be sticking close. Brook frowned. *I'm glad ve's made a friend, but...Wintersweet really needs to make more friends around vis age.*

Brook glanced at Squirrel, who was just barely containing his excitement. "So...I'm guessing you'll be happy to see a certain someone."

His cheeks flushed. "Well, I...yes." He exhaled deeply, sounding vaguely annoyed. "Do you really have to tease me about it too? Foxglove and Moth are bad enough..."

"Oh, I can imagine," Brook snorted. She didn't know Moth that well, but from what she'd heard from Chipmunk and Squirrel, teasing his

older brothers was a favourite hobby of his. "But I'll stop, just for now."

Squirrel rolled his eyes, smiling. "Gee, thanks."

Brook only replied with a simple laugh, turning her attention back to the upcoming ruins. She felt a boulder drop in her stomach upon seeing it. *That's Valor. That's my home.*

*And it's all gone.*

She had wondered if Heath ever felt sick whenever he came to the ruins. Was he aware of how much pain he brought after that day? Did he...even feel the slightest bit guilty over it? *Probably not. It's Heath, after all. He's more likely to mourn for his treasure, if anything.*

Pushing aside the feelings of unease and grief, Brook picked up her pace, not saying a word. *Let's just get this over with.* She soon caught up with Foxglove, who was already giving the signal from the top of one of the crumbled buildings. Sure enough, Pine and Azalea came out of the shadows, surprised. Both approached apprehensively, before Pine's face lit up. He rushed over to Foxglove and Brook, beaming. Azalea simply walked over, following him.

"You guys are okay!" Pine breathed. He took Foxglove's hands, squeezing them slightly. "I got so worried when I heard Heath arrested you guys-"

"Relax, Pine. We're okay now," Foxglove reprimanded him, though Brook could tell she was grateful.

Azalea only raised a brow. "We also heard that Heath planned on executing you all. You sure?"

Foxglove ignored her, gesturing for Squirrel to step forwards. He approached Pine awkwardly, a meek smile on his face.

"Hey Pine."

Pine let go of Foxglove's hands, embracing Squirrel. "Thank the moons you're alright! I've been so concerned since you stopped

showing up with Foxglove to check on us, and then I hear you could've gotten executed-" He took in a deep breath. "You worry me so much."

"That is true," Azalea chimed in, casting an irate glare towards Pine. "I could go on and on about all the things he's said, but I'll spare you." She turned to Brook, her gaze more serious. "I wouldn't have expected a whole patrol to come by, though. Does this mean...?"

Squirrel nodded. "Yeah. Heath isn't Valor's lord any more. You can all go home now, if you want."

Azalea frowned. "Wait, then who's the new lord? And what did you decide to do with him?"

Brook inhaled sharply. "I'm the new lord of Valor, apparently. It was Ivy's decision, not mine."

"Of course *she'd* make the decision for everyone," She muttered, crossing her arms. Foxglove shot a glare at her, though Azalea didn't seem to notice. "You didn't answer my other question. What did you do about Heath?"

"For now, he's a regular citizen of Valor. I'm not exactly sure what would be best to do about him right now, and I'm swamped enough."

Azalea stared at her in disbelief. "He- that awful man...you kept him *alive*? After all he's done?"

Brook avoided meeting Azalea's gaze. "I don't think I could handle giving him a death sentence. Not now, not ever." *Not only that, but...Lark and Ivy would be devastated. I couldn't willingly do that to them.*

"I can't believe the Commander Brook I knew would be the same one casually defending the vile man who banished us out here to die," Azalea spat. "Don't expect me to come back until you do something about him, *Brook*."

Before Brook could say anything else, Azalea stormed off further into the ruins. *I'm not defending him. I just haven't gotten around to*

*dealing with Heath properly yet...* But she knew that those words would be wasted on Azalea. She turned to the others - Foxglove had an expression of concern on her face, though Brook wasn't entirely sure if it was meant for Azalea or for her. Yarrow, who had been watching the scene with narrowed eyes, glanced at Pine.

"Could you take us to see the others?" He asked, his voice somewhat hoarse. "I...I need to know if she's still gone with my own eyes."

*He's talking about Aster,* Brook realised. Both Azalea and Aster were his older cousins, and if she was recalling correctly, he had been especially close with Aster. *Did she ever make it to the Indestructible City after all? I doubt it, but...there's no way she'd come back. Not after Heath.*

Pine grimaced, but nodded. "Yeah, we probably should do that anyways. I'll go on ahead." He took the lead, which prompted Squirrel and Foxglove to catch up to him.

Yarrow was about to rush to catch up to them, but looked back at Wintersweet, who was nervously glancing up at the sky every so often. He gently nudged vis shoulder.

"Hey, kid? Don't worry, I'm not going to leave your side," Yarrow murmured.

Wintersweet gave him an awkward smile, slightly leaning onto Yarrow. "I-I know that, but thanks."

Brook let them go ahead, remaining in the back. *At least Wintersweet has someone ve can rely on.* She avoided looking around the collapsed structures and ravaged crops, feeling sick. *How could Heath even stand being here for a second? How could anyone, even?*

That was probably how the banished felt, having lived in the ruins for so long. *And I couldn't do much to help,* She thought, already feeling guilty. *Not without looking suspicious to Heath.*

*Hopefully I can make it up to them now.*

---

***brief end a/n: yes Pine and Squirrel are boyfriends and i care them very much***

# Chapter 11: Wren

**WREN**

*Crap crap crap crap-*

Wren's gaze remained on the streets of the city as she continued cursing underneath her breath. Ivy had tried to keep both herself and Wren calm, but anyone could see that it wasn't working. Sky stared in the same direction as her, worried.

Leaf was gone. Wren was pretty sure he had fallen off Sky's back while they headed into the more crowded part of the town, but it remained that he was likely lost. *If not dead,* She added grimly.

Sky tapped his talons together nervously. "I think this is my fault," He mumbled. "I should've been more careful with him, especially since he was on my back."

Ivy shook her head, lightly patting his side. "Don't blame yourself, Sky. I probably shouldn't have suggested going here in the first place. Something was bound to happen and I should've known better..."

"It's no one's fault!" Wren argued. "None of us could've predicted it would happen. Instead of blaming ourselves, we need to find him before he gets himself killed!" *I'm such a hypocrite for that,* She thought. *I could've told Ivy no and she would've accepted that as an answer, I'm sure.*

Ivy sighed in defeat. "Okay then. Where should we start looking?"

For a moment, they all remained quiet. *Maybe nearby that bridge? Then again, I think we would've heard something if he fell into the water...* Wren let out a quiet groan, her head starting to hurt. Ivy gently rested her hand on Wren's shoulder, which almost caused Wren to yelp in surprise. She had an expression of concern on her face, though it was also wracked with worry for Leaf. *Why is she so*

*concerned for me right now? Is it that obvious that I'm in a mood?*

She frowned. "Don't stress yourself out, either. It won't do you or anyone any good."

Wren wanted to make a retort, but instead settled for a sharp inhale. *She's right, but...it also won't do us any good to remain completely unrelaxed about this. And seems practically impossible.*

"Any ideas?" She asked after taking one last deep breath.

Sky pointed over in the area near the side of the town they had come in; before the bridge were several streets that sprawled into smaller pathways, the main one leading into the other side of town. A few stalls had been set up close by - would one of the dragons there have seen a small human fall off a pale coloured mountain dragon's back? *And...have possibly eaten him?* She hated the idea, but it wasn't implausible.

"We could try looking over there - I think that might be where he fell off, anyways," Sky explained.

Wren shrugged. "Better idea than mine, I'm sure. Ivy?"

Ivy stared at Wren, taken out of her brief daze. "...yeah?" Before Wren could repeat herself, Ivy blinked in sudden realisation. "Oh, yes! That sounds like a good plan, Sky!"

*Just how much are you even paying attention to this?* Wren wanted to ask out loud, but quickly decided it was for the best that she said nothing about Ivy's behaviour. She instead began to climb onto Sky's back, gesturing for Ivy to hop on. Ivy struggled for a while, but eventually managed to get on with both Wren and Sky's help. *She's getting better, at the very least...*

As Sky made his way through the significantly smaller crowd, Wren managed to tear her gaze away from Ivy. *Her questions were pretty odd...but also kind of interesting,* She thought, craning her neck to see if she could spot Leaf anywhere. *I've never thought about it much, I guess.*

Wren could feel Ivy unconsciously leaning onto her - Ivy herself

didn't seem to notice. *Is she just doing that for comfort? ...does she really trust me that much?* She didn't say anything to Ivy about it, and felt perfectly content with avoiding the topic. *Besides...I really don't want to worry her even more.*

Upon reaching the area, Wren's gaze darted across the bridge and river underneath it. *I don't think he would've fallen into the river that easily. And even then, I'm pretty sure Rowan taught him how to swim...*

Ivy hummed quietly. "I don't think we lost him over here. Maybe it was in the middle of the crowd?" She grimaced at the streets. "Ugh...I know you said this isn't my fault, but it certainly *feels* like it."

"I get that. I kind of feel the same way," Wren confessed, surprising Ivy. "But we need to focus on finding Leaf right now, okay? I'm certain that he doesn't blame any of us for this, either."

Her expression of surprise morphed into a small smile. "If you say so. I'll try." She crossed her arms, frowning. "Do you think we really lost him here, though? I can't spot him anywhere."

Wren shrugged. "Maybe he tried to find his way out of the city? It seems plausible enough." *It's also likely, if you think about it...I don't think he would've stayed in one single spot after something like that.*

She stayed quiet for a moment, thinking. "That would make sense, yeah. But where would he go?"

After another bout of silence, Wren could hear talon steps drawing near. *That can't be Sky, obviously...why would another dragon approach us?* She leaned in closer onto Sky's neck, while taking hold of Ivy's hand and lightly squeezing it. Ivy blushed upon noticing, but said nothing. As she turned around, she noticed an odd-looking desert dragon walking over to them, a confused look on her face. *Could she be the dragon Ivy and Leaf are looking for? ...No, probably not. Ivy said the dragon was more of a golden colour.*

That didn't change the fact that Wren still thought she looked rather odd, however. The new arrival had mostly sandy, light brown scales, with dark brown scales topping them on her face, back, and

tail. In between the dark brown and sandy scales was a light orange, similar to the colour of a mountain dragon's scales. Her underbelly and wings were a pale salmon pink, and her frill was a light yellowish-brown. The dragon's eyes matched a typical desert dragon's - though her tail didn't, as it had no barb.

Wren glanced briefly at Ivy. "I can assume that she isn't the golden dragon you mentioned, right?"

Ivy almost let out a snort of laughter. "I would hope not." She looked more serious for a moment. "What does she want with us? I don't think she saw us..."

Shrugging, Wren craned her neck to get a better glimpse. "We'll see."

The dragon tilted her head. "Hello there," She greeted. "I'm Gnatcatcher. Are you looking for something? I noticed you were just hanging around here, and well...that looks pretty suspicious."

Sky frowned. "I...yes. I'm looking for a human-"

"*Scavenger*," Wren reminded him, her voice a hushed whisper.

"Scavenger, I mean," He corrected himself. "Have you seen him?"

Gnatcatcher was silent for a moment - Wren had to guess she caught onto his slip up. *Oh well, I suppose. As long as she didn't hear me, I guess.* Ivy gently tapped Wren's shoulder, a questioning look on her face.

"What's she saying?"

Wren grimaced. "She's just asking what we were doing, and is trying to think if she saw Leaf anywhere."

Ivy exhaled softly. "That's something at least, but...are you sure she'll be able to tell it's Leaf specifically? Compared to dragons, we're-"

"Miniature? Yes, I know." Wren wanted to apologise to Ivy for her brisk tone upon seeing her face, but her attention was grabbed by

Gnatcatcher.

Gnatcatcher grimaced. "Well, I'm not sure if it's the scavenger you're looking for, but I did come across one while I was minding the antique shop. Perhaps I might have found it?"

Wren had a plethora of problems with Gnatcatcher using the term 'it' in regards to humans, especially Leaf, but she knew it was best to just leave it alone. *I don't want to ruin our only chance to find Leaf - even if I really, really want to snap at her for saying that...*

"Really? Can w- I see, please?" Sky asked - Wren could tell he was hoping that Gnatcatcher had missed his second slip up, and she was too. *Just how obvious is it that we aren't used to this sort of thing?*

Gnatcatcher nodded, gesturing for him to walk by her side. Wren remained on Sky's back, still unsure of this whole idea. *Better than nothing, I suppose.* She glanced at Ivy, who seemed more focused on the newcomer if anything. Wren had to guess it was because of her odd appearance - the dusty orange scales and dark brown scales looked strange, on a desert dragon at least. *Or maybe it's just because Ivy hasn't seen many dragons up close before.* Upon taking another look at the wide-eyed expression on Ivy's face, Wren smothered a giggle. *Probably both.*

After some silence, Gnatcatcher spoke up. "So...the scavenger you're looking for is your pet, I'm guessing?"

Sky frowned - he was unsure how to answer, and Wren couldn't exactly blame him, either. "Well, um-" Before he could finish, Gnatcatcher's attention was elsewhere - namely, on Wren and Ivy.

"Oh! I didn't notice you had two others. So are they as well?" She asked. Wren wanted to scream. No, she was *not* a pet and any time she said anything about it with Sky, it was strictly a *joke*. And it made no sense to her, either - how would a pet be able to raise a baby dragon? *They wouldn't, that's how!*

Ivy took her hand out of Wren's own, placing it on Wren's shoulder. She grimaced. "Wren, I don't know what's going on since you aren't translating anything for me, but it looks like you want to shout at

her or even stab her, so I'd like to ask if you could...avoid doing any of that? Please?"

Wren huffed, crossing her arms. "*Fine*. But that doesn't mean I won't be any less annoyed with being called a pet in an obviously non-joking manner. I mean, seriously! I look nothing like a pet!" Ivy only let out a quiet, mildly sympathetic laugh, gently rubbing Wren's shoulder.

"Uh...technically, yes?"

Gnatcatcher hummed to herself, her attention back on the streets. "That sounds like a lot of work. Taking care of scavengers, I mean."

"I suppose so," Sky replied, still sounding awkward. "I don't think it's that hard though. The three I'm travelling with are pretty good at taking care of themselves, I think."

Shrugging, Gnatcatcher's expression remained indifferent. "That would make sense, I guess. It would be odd if there was a dragon taking care of all the scavengers living in those dens I've seen on my work trips. Most dragons I've seen would eat them without a second thought."

Before Sky could ask more about that, Gnatcatcher turned to one of the huts on a less busy street - it was rather small, and seemed like it hadn't had a dragon living in it for years prior to Gnatcatcher's arrival. It was made of dried mud bricks, though Wren wasn't sure how long that would last. It seemed like Gnatcatcher had moved into it recently and didn't have that many options, as Wren felt certain that there would be better places in the city to live than a small, crumbling hut.

"This is where I put the scavenger, since I didn't want it to accidentally suffocate in my pouch." She sighed as she opened the door. "Apologies for the inside. I haven't gotten much time to properly clean up since moving in, and my job has kept me a bit preoccupied at the moment."

"I don't think it looks bad," Sky assured her after walking in. The inside was a little cramped and cluttered, but Wren didn't think it

looked too bad. *She probably cleaned up a bit when she placed Leaf here. Or whoever it is she found.*

Gnatcatcher shrugged once again. "Thanks, I suppose." She looked around the room for a bit, her eyes narrowed. Looking at the ground, she gestured to the legs of a small table that had seen better days. "The scavenger should be hiding there. I'm guessing it didn't particularly like the table."

Soon enough, Leaf had appeared from behind one of the table's legs - his expression of fear had quickly morphed into one of pure relief. *Oh, thank the moons he's alright-* Sky also seemed similarly relieved, sighing deeply. Ivy said nothing, though Wren could tell Ivy was glad Leaf was alright. Leaf rushed over to them, letting Sky place him on his back, albeit being slightly wary.

Ivy smiled, hugging him. "You're okay!"

Leaf chuckled awkwardly. "Yeah, sorry if I made you guys worry."

"Of course you made us worry!" Wren snapped, also embracing him. She drew back, exhaling softly. "Did you mean to fall off of Sky's back? We lost you in the crowd and couldn't find you."

He crossed his arms. "I...didn't mean to fall. I guess the height just..." He looked away, frowning. *Is he afraid of heights? Is that what caused this? Or was it a mixture of that and something else?* Wren wanted to ask, but it was clear he wasn't going to answer.

Sky smiled at Gnatcatcher. "Thank you for helping! I'm not sure we would've found him without your help." He tilted his head slightly. "Though I have to ask...why didn't you eat him when you found him?" *I hate to admit it, but...I was wondering that, too...*

"I don't really think much of scavengers, but I don't eat them since my father was interested in studying them after the war ended since there was the whole...you know, them killing the SandWing queen thing," She explained, looking vaguely upset. "I didn't want to get in the way of that, so I didn't eat them. Even though I'm not sure where he is now or if he's even alive, it still feels like I'm respecting his wishes by not eating any, so I don't."

"Oh. I'm sorry about your dad," Sky said after she finished.

Gnatcatcher shrugged once more. "It's fine. I'm sure he's alive, wherever he is." As they began to leave Gnatcatcher's hut, she took one last glance at Leaf, then back at Sky. "Have safe travels. I do recommend keeping a closer eye on the one you were looking for, though. He really doesn't seem to do well when he's up too high."

Sky gave her one last nod, leaving the hut. Wren cast one last glance at Leaf as they made their way out of the city, frowning. He was sitting next to Ivy, leaning onto her slightly. *He's clearly not okay.*

...

It had been a few hours since they had left the dragon city, or Possibility, as it was called. They had made decent progress, even if they were just walking - they had made it across most of the river, which took longer than expected. Looking back, it seemed like the city also happened to be the same one Sky had gotten taken in, which didn't help Wren like Possibility any more. She guessed it was due to the size of how big the city was - she wasn't going to admit that she had thought wrong, though.

Wren was resting on Sky's back, while Leaf and Ivy walked alongside him at a relatively even pace. Ivy hadn't left Leaf's side since leaving the city, and Wren couldn't fault her for it - Wren was also pretty concerned about him.

Ivy grimaced. "Are you sure? You really don't look like you're okay."

He sighed. "I'll get over it."

"So...no, you aren't okay. Is there anything I can do to help, or...?"

"I said I'll get over it," He repeated, sounding more irritated. "Look, I don't want to talk about it any more, alright?"

Ivy looked away from him, her shoulders slumping. "I...alright, then."

*Is his fear of heights really that bad?* Wren wasn't particularly inclined

to mind much, since she had her suspicions that he didn't like heights, especially after his near-death experience with Cereus. *I can't blame him for it, but...I don't think it'd hurt for him to just admit that it makes him uncomfortable, either.* She was mildly frustrated since this made flying somewhat harder than before, but she and Sky could probably figure something out. *Probably.*

Soon they had come to a stop at a decently sized oasis - the sun was already beginning to set and they all were growing tired from the amount of walking. Wren climbed off of Sky's back, yawning a little once reaching the ground.

Leaf gently placed his sword on the ground, grimacing. "I'm going fishing." Without waiting for a reply, he took off. *Yeesh.*

"Hey, um...Wren?" Ivy mumbled. Wren turned to her, raising an eyebrow. "I know you offered to teach me Dragon, but I think I'm going to go fishing with Leaf. I'm still worried and I kind of...need to talk to him."

Wren shrugged. "It's fine. I figured you two need the alone time, anyways."

Ivy scoffed, rolling her eyes as she headed off in Leaf's direction. *What did I- oh.* Wren groaned upon realising. *Did she seriously think I was joking about her and Leaf again? I need to clarify that to her...*

There wasn't much Wren could do about it at the moment, though. She glanced up at Sky, sighing. "Wanna see if those date palms are edible? I need help grabbing them, anyways."

"Sure!" Sky responded with a nod. Wren followed him over to one of the palm trees, folding her arms. *I can't believe today happened.*

# Chapter 12: Ivy

**IVY**

"Gah!" Leaf wiped off the water splashed in his face with his shoulder's sleeve - Ivy thought it was impractical, but she wasn't going to say that out loud. *It's...not even that much water.*

Leaf had insisted on fishing by hand, despite Ivy's protests that it'd probably be better if they tried to use a spear. He was confident that he didn't need to use anything else but his bare hands, and while Ivy had several doubts that it'd be efficient, she *did* find it vaguely amusing to watch.

Ivy let out a few laughs by accident. "Catch anything yet?"

He looked up at her and scowled - though he burst into a few chuckles upon seeing Ivy's face. "No."

"Do you want any help?" She asked once she managed to stop laughing.

Leaf shook his head, glancing back at the pool. "Nah, I don't think I need it. And I don't think you know how to fish, if I'm being honest."

Huffing, Ivy crossed her arms. "You aren't wrong, but I could be a great help if you taught me!"

His gaze went wide for a few moments. "Is that...something you want me to teach you? Because I mean, if you want me to, I can."

"Sure! It'd probably be a big help since we're probably going to find more sources of water like this." *And I really don't want to be a dead weight...I want to be useful, too.*

After a brief moment of silence, Leaf nodded. "Alright, I can do that. Just...not here. It isn't exactly ideal to teach you how to fish in an oasis." *That makes sense, I guess. I wish he'd just teach me now,*

*though...*

Ivy leaned back, her hands scratching against the coarse sand. "Alright. But I'm half-convinced that you're just saying that because you don't want my help," She joked.

Leaf smirked, nudging her shoulder. "Maybe I am, maybe I'm not."

Slightly off balance, she shoved Leaf back, laughing. Leaf yelped as he fell forwards, tumbling into the water. Ivy let out a barely audible gasp. *Oh moons no, I just pushed him into the water, crap-* He waded around in the water for a bit, catching his breath.

"Leaf, I'm so sorry! I didn't mean to do that!"

Shrugging, Leaf stretched a bit. "It's fine. This isn't that deep, anyways. I wouldn't drown that easily, if at all."

Ivy sighed. "Still though." She watched as he drifted around in the water for a bit. "So you know how to swim, too?"

He grinned. "Yep! This isn't really much compared to swimming against a river current, though. It's pretty relaxing, honestly."

*He's probably just saying it casually,* She reminded herself. *But part of me keeps thinking that he's just saying it to impress me. It's stupid to think about, but...* Ivy groaned inwardly. She hated when she thought like that. It was confusing to think about, especially since she hadn't given it any thought at all until Daffodil teased her about her relationship with Leaf - and Wren, for that matter, but Ivy tried her best to ignore those remarks from Wren and forget about them. *Why did things have to get so confusing?*

Leaf splashed some water onto her legs to get her attention. "Ivy? You alright?"

"Hmm? Oh," She mumbled, glancing back at him. "I was just...thinking."

"...Did you want to talk about it? If you want to, that is."

Ivy sat up, grimacing. "I guess so. We kind of need to talk about it,

anyways."

Leaf frowned, exhaling deeply. "It's about our relationship, isn't it?"

Hesitantly, Ivy nodded. "Yeah." She tucked into her legs, resting her chin on her arms. "I've just been really confused. Ever since Daffodil teased me about you, I just...really didn't know what to think? I mean, I don't mind it but I never really thought much about romance, especially with the whole thing with my dad...and I never noticed anyone being interested in me, though I'm probably just...really oblivious to it."

Taking a moment to think, Leaf placed his arms on the shore. "I get that. I really like hanging out with you, and I never thought about us like that until Daffodil mentioned that. And Wren teasing me about it, too, I suppose...the kiss didn't help much, either. It's all really confusing."

"I'm sorry! I meant for it to be on the cheek, but-" She stopped herself, laughing awkwardly. "Well, it's over with. For what it's worth, it wasn't half bad. Your breath kind of smells, though."

"My breath does *not* smell," He snapped. "But thanks, I guess?"

Ivy giggled softly. "You're welcome." *And it really does, but...that's not a debate I want to get into.* "So...do you want to settle on being just friends, maybe?"

He gave her a small smile. "Of course. I'm just glad I get to talk to you in the first place."

Ivy almost let out a breath of relief. *Well, at least that's settled. For the most part, anyways.* Leaf remained in the water, still searching for fish. *He's still trying? That's both impressive and ridiculous, honestly.*

"So...could you teach me how to swim?"

Leaf smirked. "*Suuure.*" *That's...definitely not suspicious at all.*

Before Ivy could react, Leaf grabbed onto her, dragging her into the water. She let out a shriek, flailing as she struggled to stand. While she flailed around, she could've sworn she had hit Leaf on accident

at least once. Even if she did, she didn't find it in her to care.

She glared at Leaf once she retained her balance. "I hate you!" She snapped, shoving him as hard as she could.

"Alright, alright! I'm sorry, but I couldn't let that opportunity just go to waste!" Leaf managed to say once Ivy stopped splashing him with water.

Ivy crossed her arms. "What was that even *for*?"

Leaf began laughing. "Think of it as revenge."

"Because I pushed you into the water on accident, or because I called your breath gross?"

"Either works."

Laughing, she shoved him again, albeit lighter. "Well, if I'm going to be stuck in the water with you, then you might as well teach me how to fish."

He shrugged, grinning. "I can do that."

...

Wren came rushing to them once she noticed Ivy and Leaf. She burst into laughter upon getting a better look.

"What *happened* to you two?"

Leaf cast a smug grin in Ivy's direction. "I got sweet revenge."

Ivy rolled her eyes at him, then turned to Wren. "He was just upset that I called his breath smelly, even though it is!"

Wren didn't bother hiding her amusement. "To be fair, Leaf...I'd trust Ivy's word over yours in this case."

He scoffed. "Neither of you would know bad breath even if it hit you in the face." *Oh, it has, Leaf. It has.*

"Anyways...how did the fishing go?" Wren asked, though she was

still holding back a few giggles.

Leaf gestured to the fish in his hands - they were wrapped in a fallen palm leaf, as neither Ivy or Leaf had wanted to touch the fish themselves. Inside was only a few fish, but enough for everyone, excluding Sky - Ivy had guessed Wren and Sky were gathering something else for him regardless. Wren took the fish, humming quietly to herself.

Leaf grimaced slightly. "...Is that enough?"

Wren nodded. "Should be. Sky and I were getting some date palms while you two were busy fishing, so we won't be having just fish."

"Oooh, I've never had those before," Ivy said, her body tingling with excitement. "I wonder what they taste like?"

Leaf shrugged. "I wouldn't know. I haven't had them, either."

Ivy took his hands in her own. "Then we can find out together!"

He smiled at her briefly, then glanced back at Wren. "I can go collect some firewood. I can say that eating raw fish is...not a good idea, speaking from personal experience."

"I'm sorry, but what do you mean by 'personal experience'-" Wren began, though Leaf had already taken off. She sighed, glancing at Ivy. "I have several concerns."

"I do too," Ivy muttered. She looked over at the small clearing Wren had made - if Ivy was recalling correctly, there had been a decent amount of fallen leaves on the ground. "Oh, so that's where we're sleeping?"

Wren nodded, looking vaguely proud. "Yeah, though it isn't the best place, probably. I only felt like moving a few things."

Ivy smiled warmly at her. "Well, I still think it looks nice!"

Her cheeks flushing, Wren awkwardly returned the smile. "If you say so."

"...Are you sure that the dates are entirely edible?" Ivy asked after an awkward period of silence.

Shrugging, Wren seemed indifferent. "Eh. I'm sure we'll find out soon enough." *That...is a terrible plan.* "Hey, it's a decent idea compared to what else I came up with. And besides...we still have those blueberries from earlier!"

*For her sake, I'm not going to mention that I'm also hoping those haven't gone bad, either. I mean, they've been sitting in that bag of yours all day...mostly in the desert sun, no less.*

"Is there anything else we need to do? It looks like we have almost everything covered."

Wren was quiet for a moment. "Nope, I don't think so. You can help me get started on the fire once Leaf comes back, if you really want."

Ivy raised an eyebrow, tilting her head slightly. "I've never tried setting a fire, but...I'd want to try, I think!"

"I'll try to make sure you don't burn yourself, then. And I'm sure Leaf and Sky will help, too." Wren glanced back at the clearing, stretching a bit as she began to make her way towards it. "I'm going to rest for a bit in the meanwhile. My everything is tired."

*I can't blame her for that,* She thought. *It has been a pretty exhausting day. Come to think of it, I'm pretty tired myself...* Ivy followed after Wren, sitting down next to her. Wren had placed her own sword next to Leaf's, which had surprised Ivy to some extent - she thought Wren would keep it on her at all times. *I guess she wasn't exactly worried this time around.* She frowned slightly at the swords. *I wish I had something to defend myself with. And it just makes me feel...useless, not having anything to help out with, in case anything happens. Wren and Leaf have their swords, Sky is...well, a dragon regardless of whether he has fire or not. Me?*

*Nothing. Absolutely nothing.*

Ivy didn't particularly like dwelling on that, however. She knew too well that dwelling on the negatives of her life just made her feel

more miserable, and she didn't want to burden others with her problems, especially when she felt her problems were ridiculous to complain about. *Not to mention, feeling miserable is one of my least favourite things in all of Pyrrhia.*

She instead focused on the sunset - various blues were melting into the orange glow the sun gave off, which shone brightly in Ivy's eyes. She didn't mind it, though - it wasn't as harsh as it was earlier, and it still was a wonderful mixture of colours, in Ivy's opinion. *I can't believe I've been missing out on something like this for most of my life.*

"The sunset's so pretty," She murmured to herself. "I've never gotten to see one like this, even back in the ruins."

Wren's light laughter grabbed Ivy's attention. "You...really have been sheltered from most of the surface, huh?"

Nodding, Ivy let her hands glide through the sand. "Yeah. I had to imagine everything until I was eight, I think. And even then, I think I got really lucky that Foxglove was willing to take me outside of Valor at that age."

"I couldn't imagine living like that," Wren admitted after some silence. Sky, who had been listening in on their conversation, nodded. "It's been mostly Sky and I, but even before that, I knew some things about the outside. Well, especially since I live on the surface and not underground, but you know what I mean."

Ivy shrugged. "I guess that was another thing my dad indirectly took from me." After thinking her words over, she added, "I don't really mind, though. I still got the chance to become a Wingwatcher, and I've gotten better at handling all the stuff outside. But sometimes things like the wind and sunlight can still be overwhelming for me, I guess."

Wren had a frown on her face for a while, then suddenly perked up. "Oh! I have an idea - maybe after we find that golden dragon, you could keep travelling with us? I'm sure there's places even we haven't been to yet."

"You're serious? Of course, I'd love to keep travelling with you guys!"

The smile on Wren's face simply grew wider. "Aww, thanks. I promise I'll try to take you to all the places on Pyrrhia - or at least, all the ones I can."

Ivy beamed, hugging Wren. "No, thank you! This is amazing!"

Foot steps could be heard nearing them as they continued talking. Ivy turned to see Leaf walking towards them, a bundle of tree bark in his hands. He set them down in front of him, sitting down.

"Did I miss anything, or...?"

"Wren just promised she'd let me keep travelling with her and Sky even after we find the golden dragon!" She exclaimed, her heart racing. *I can't believe she actually suggested that!* "I can't wait to see all of Pyrrhia!"

Leaf smiled. "I'm glad you have something in mind while we search for the golden dragon, then."

*What does that mean?* "Is there something you had in mind, Leaf?" She eventually asked, unsure how to word her question.

He shrugged, now laying on the ground. "I'm just unsure about what I want to do after this, I guess. Or how to do it." Letting out a sigh, he shut his eyes. "Don't worry about me, though. I'm probably going to have something in mind once this is over."

*That just makes me worry more!* Ivy didn't bother with arguing - Leaf didn't seem to be in the mood for it, and neither was Ivy herself. *And I want to believe he'll figure something out by the time we find her.* She instead curled up into a position where she could rest her head on Wren's shoulder, exhaling softly. Her gaze remained on the sunset.

*Even though things are stressful right now, the world always looks so beautiful. I wish I was able to look at the sunset like this all the time...maybe that would've been more soothing to watch after mom and dad's fights instead of imagining it? Or maybe the winds would distract*

*me more from dad's anger when it's too much to handle?*

*...I wish dad didn't try to steal that treasure. And I wish that the dragon attack never happened. I really wish I didn't have to live in hiding like that because of him, and have to miss so many amazing things like this.*

# Chapter 13: Rowan

**ROWAN**

Night was starting to fall by the time Grove was almost finished with the shelter. Tadpole, Cranberry, and Mallow had been helping him on and off for most of the day - the others had brought more supplies when they had ran out, which was more often than Rowan would've liked to admit. Rowan was sitting by the fire Camellia had started (it was one of Camellia's few good ideas, according to Bluebell). She was cold, though the warmth of Bluebell and Thyme sitting next to her somewhat made up for that.

Bluebell groaned quietly. "It's going to take forever for us to finish all these shelters."

Thyme shrugged, albeit barely. "We'll finish them eventually."

"I'd rather have them take a while than rush them, anyways," Rowan added. "It'll be safer in the long run."

"I guess so, but...I also don't want to suffer in the rain," Bluebell muttered, digging her face further into her arms.

Sighing, Thyme nodded weakly. "I get that. Though it's not the worst thing that would happen to me, so I wouldn't mind."

*Oh,* Rowan thought once she realised what he meant. *He's still upset about Mushroom.* Rowan was more bitter over Mushroom's betrayal if anything, but she could tell Thyme was taking it the worst out of her, Cranberry, and Grove. She gently brushed his arm with her elbow - his gaze briefly flickered to her, something resembling a smile forming on his face. *At least he knows I'm still here for him.*

Camellia seemed to notice their silent exchange, but said nothing about it. *Odd, considering this is Camellia.* Rowan could tell she looked...semi-confused, at most. *She does seem to be expressing something that isn't anger towards someone, though. I guess everyone*

*has to start somewhere.*

She crossed her arms upon realising Rowan was observing her. "Well, if it *does* end up raining, most of us will end up being sick. I don't know if any of you could tell, but I hate being sick. I'm never doing *that* again." *Is she...trying to act like this because she dislikes me, or...? No, that can't be it. She's typically like this towards everyone except those she knows will probably hurt her if she acts like that.*

Bluebell lifted her head just to roll her eyes at Camellia. "If it bugs you so much, then why don't you help out? It's not like there's anything stopping you."

"In case you didn't notice, I'm *trying* to keep this fire going!" Camellia snapped back.

"...Literally anyone can do that," Bluebell retorted with a shrug.

Camellia narrowed her eyes at her. "And anyone can help out with the shelter."

Rowan inhaled sharply. "Camellia, remind me how old you are?"

"She's twenty-one," Bluebell cut in before Camellia could get a word in. She glanced back at Camellia, then back at Rowan. "I feel like I should clarify that I mean twenty-one as in years old, and not twenty-one months old."

"Both of you can zip it!" Camellia hissed.

Before Bluebell could reply, Grove walked over to the fire, clearing his throat. *Thank the moons for that...*

"I'm finished with most of the shelter," He breathed, rubbing his forehead. "But right now I'm exhausted and need a break. Can one of you take over for a little bit, at the very least? I'd really appreciate it."

Thyme cast an irked glare at Camellia before turning to Grove. "I can take over."

Grove grimaced. "You sure? I don't mind if you want to, but...I don't

want you overworking yourself."

He got to his feet regardless, waving off Grove's concerns. "I'll be fine. Besides, it'll probably take my mind off of Mushroom."

Rowan couldn't help but feel a twinge of anger. *I still don't understand how he could feel so awful about it. Mushroom was never that good of a brother to him, or a friend, even.* She frowned, exhaling quietly. *Well, I'm the one to speak. I'm probably the worst older sister in Pyrrhia.* Still, even if she had to remind herself that Thyme considered himself close to Mushroom, even though it was...obvious that Mushroom hated him. *Maybe he's just wishing that things between them had been differently.*

*I can't blame him for that. It isn't like I haven't felt the same towards any of my siblings before...especially with Wren.*

Camellia eyed him warily. "Are you going to finish it properly?"

*Did she not hear the part where he said he wants to take his mind off of his brother? The gall she has sometimes...* Camellia's question went unanswered, however - Thyme simply resumed working on the shelter where Grove had left off, not saying a single word. Rowan could hear Bluebell just barely holding her laughter - she couldn't blame Bluebell for it, though she was still annoyed with Camellia. Camellia seemed to overhear as well, shooting daggers in Bluebell's direction before marching over to the incomplete shelter.

Cranberry turned to her in a deliberately bored manner. "What does Her Majesty need now?"

"I'm making sure this shelter is built properly," Camellia snapped - Rowan was more surprised Camellia didn't lose it over Cranberry's snide remark. "So you can go spend time with your boyfriend and girlfriend or whatever, because I'm doing so whether you like it or not."

Blushing, Cranberry just gave Camellia an odd look before sitting down next to Rowan, sighing. Grove seemed more amused if anything.

"What does that even mean?" Rowan mumbled. The first response she got was a disbelieving stare from Bluebell.

"I- you're serious? She's talking about you and Grove!"

Rowan's cheeks immediately began to heat up. "No one ever said we were dating!"

Bluebell huffed. "You might as well be dating already, considering how obvious you three are!"

Cranberry crossed her arms. "We are not obvious!"

"To be fair, we kind of are," Grove added, shrugging. Cranberry threw a clump of grass at him - he only chuckled at her as the grass landed right next to his feet.

She scoffed. "If we were obvious, then I'd be flirting with you and Rowan constantly!"

Bluebell snorted, her hands on her mouth. "Implying you don't do that already?"

Glaring at her for a moment, Cranberry turned to Rowan. "Rowan, how often would you say I flirt with you?"

"Uhh..." *How well would "I really did not pick up on any of this from you or Grove at all" work as an answer?*

Grove sat on the ground, shaking his head slightly. "Cran, don't pressure her."

Cranberry opened her mouth to argue, but sighed. "Yeah, I guess you're right. Sorry Rowan." She glanced back at Rowan. "But would you mind if I flirted with you more often?"

Rowan's face felt hot. "No! I just- can we not talk about this in front of Bluebell?" *Or Camellia, Mallow, Thyme...literally everyone but us?*

"What did I do?" Bluebell whined, pouting.

"You're *embarrassing*," Rowan groaned.

Bluebell mocked offense. "And Camellia *isn't*?" Camellia only shot Bluebell a dirty look - Rowan guessed that having Camellia work on the shelter was beneficial in more ways than one. *That actually got her to shut up. Maybe we should have her work on more stuff in the future...*

Rowan raised an eyebrow, smirking. "I never said she wasn't."

Bluebell shoved Rowan, giggling. "You are just the worst!"

Stumbling onto Cranberry a bit, Rowan let out a few laughs. Cranberry was also amused, pushing Bluebell back. Still laughing, Bluebell fell onto her back, looking up at the sky. Rowan remained laying down on Cranberry's lap, sighing to herself. Grove moved closer to them, wrapping an arm around Cranberry's shoulder. *They actually seem to like me in that way, despite everything...why?*

She didn't want to focus on it much, however - she didn't want to ruin the moment with her negativity. Soon Mallow and Camellia came back, warming up by the fire. Rowan couldn't see much, but she had to assume Mallow had several splinters in her hands, judging by the grumbling she did. Camellia barely mustered a scowl, instead choosing to help with the splinters. *Compassion from Camellia? Normally I'd laugh, but...it is Mallow she's dealing with.*

For the longest time, Camellia and Mallow typically spent their time together - despite Camellia's attitude. Rowan always found it odd, but at least there was someone Camellia thought was worthy of her time outside of herself. *I wish I had taken the time to actually spend time with either of them...even though Camellia is, well...Camellia.*

"Hey, kid? I appreciate the help, but you can take a break. You've been working nonstop all day." It was Thyme. Rowan tilted her head slightly to see.

Tadpole grimaced. "I want to keep working, though. If I don't, then it'll just prove that I'm something I'm not."

Thyme placed a hand on Tadpole's shoulder. "Hey, don't let Camellia get to you, alright? I'm glad you're trying to prove that you're trustworthy, but don't pass out in the process."

"I...why do you care?" Tadpole didn't seem frustrated, though the tone of his voice seemed to say otherwise.

Nudging Tadpole in the direction of the fire, Thyme didn't meet his gaze. "Get some rest."

Tadpole looked like he wanted to argue, but didn't bother. He glanced around the fire - Camellia gave him a hostile glare. Instead he sat next to Bluebell, who offered to let him sit nearby.

Cranberry rubbed her eyes, yawning softly. "We should probably make sleeping plans."

Mallow inhaled sharply as Camellia managed to pull a splinter out of her hand. "Yeah, that seems like a good idea."

"We only have one shelter," Camellia grumbled. *Wow, Camellia, thanks for the reminder.* "And it looks like it can fit three people *at best.*"

Bluebell snickered quietly. "Surprised she didn't claim it for herself."

Camellia glowered her. "I have these things called *standards*. Perhaps you haven't heard of them, but I have several!"

Cranberry rolled her eyes. "Camellia, you're welcome to sleep in the mud if you can't handle a shelter."

"Yeah, Camellia!" Bluebell added, a smug grin on her face. "You could make your own mud hut so you don't have to deal with undignified people like ourselves, as you'd say."

"Absolutely not! I'd choke on it!" *She does realise that saying that kind of implies she'd be eating mud, right...?* Rowan struggled to avoid bursting into laughter at the image.

Grove pursed his lips. "Okay, I think we got it. No mud." He glanced back at Cranberry. "I think the youngest should sleep in the shelter. They need the sleep the most, probably."

Camellia threw her arms up in the air, causing Mallow to yelp. "I need sleep, too!"

Rowan frowned. "But you...just said that you didn't want to sleep in the shelter." She was still trying her best not to laugh at Camellia, but failing miserably - or at least, that's what the scowl on Camellia's face told her.

"Camellia, in her defense, you *did* say you have standards," Mallow reminded her, smiling nervously.

"And no one said that you *wouldn't* get sleep," Bluebell coughed.

Cranberry let out an exasperated sigh. "Regardless of what Camellia thinks, I think Grove's suggestion is a good one for now. And besides, some of us are already used to sleeping out in the wilderness. We'll be building more, so it isn't like we'll be living like this forever." She hardly glanced in Bluebell and Tadpole's direction. "I'd assume you two are the youngest."

Bluebell gave her a disgruntled stare. "Yes, I'm probably one of the youngest out of all of us." She sat up, lightly nudging Tadpole's shoulder. "Hey, how old are you?"

"F-Fifteen," He stammered.

Bluebell threw her fist into the air. "So I'm not the youngest after all? Yes!" She turned back to him, a sympathetic expression on her face. "Sorry, Tadpole."

*He really is around Leaf's age,* Rowan thought. *And he...managed to stomach working for the dragonmancers like that. Even though he doesn't look like it, he stomached arresting Grove.* If things had been different, would Leaf have ended up like Tadpole? Rowan shrugged off the thought. *I...it won't do me any good thinking about that right now.*

Exhaling softly, Cranberry glanced down at Rowan. "Are you going to sleep like that, Rowan?"

Rowan looked up at her, barely moving an inch. "Maybe."

Gently rustling her hair, Cranberry huffed. "But how will I go to sleep?"

"You won't." Rowan stuck her tongue out at her, giggling quietly.

Cranberry chortled. "How evil of you."

As she curled up against Cranberry even more, Rowan let out a soft sigh, smiling. *This...isn't nearly as bad as I thought it'd be,* She thought as she shut her eyes. *Maybe this will be possible after all, even though I've messed up enough things already.*

# Chapter 14: Forest

**FOREST**

"Remind me again, what's the purpose of this?"

"I told you already, Forest! I'm not repeating the obvious to you."

Forest groaned as Violet continued searching the cave - or more accurately, his mom's office. She had been insistent on seeing the office upon realising Brook had already left for the patrol. 'I want to see if there's anything relating to the banished Wingwatchers,' She had told him. 'And maybe Heath.' He wasn't sure why she was so interested in investigating the latter, especially since the whole thing with Heath was mostly over. *Why did I let Daffodil talk me into letting her come over as well?*

Since Brook had been out for most of the day, Forest had their whole cave to himself. It typically happened whenever Brook had to run a job outside of the tunnels, or had any sort of meeting. He didn't mind it much, but he did find it annoying when she had to leave constantly for her Wingwatcher duties. *I enjoy spending time with her a lot, especially outside of our jobs...I wish she'd realise that.*

Daffodil walked up to him, laughing awkwardly. "Sorry about her, Forest. She's still kind of grumpy about missing the patrol." She suddenly frowned, huffing quietly. "And to be honest, so am I."

He raised an eyebrow. "You really think that you could've snuck outside of the caves without anyone noticing?"

"Well, duh! And even if I couldn't for some ridiculous reason, I practically helped save Valor! There's no reason I *shouldn't* be allowed to go along with," Daffodil argued, waving a hand at him. She glanced back at Violet. "But I have to admit, I'm not really sure why we need to keep looking into this? Heath's not the lord of Valor any more, and Brook's planning on bringing the banished back."

*Yeah...my mom- Brook's the lord of Valor now.* He still found it weird to consider her that - he was always used to calling her the Wingwatcher commander, as he could vividly remember her being heavily invested in her job, even when he was especially young. *Maybe I'm still used to calling Heath the lord of Valor, but...* He shrugged it off. *I'll probably get used to it. Eventually.*

Violet grimaced. "I'm curious to see if there's anything more on the banished. Especially the ones who we don't really know why they got banished in the first place."

Daffodil's expression didn't change one bit. "It's...Ivy's dad. Do we really need to find out why everyone got banished? He was obviously paranoid." She crossed her arms, looking away. "And besides, I don't think this is even a smart idea."

*That's what I said!* Forest thought indignantly. If Forest was being honest, the only reason he had allowed Violet to poke around was because he was certain that she would've blackmailed him if he told her otherwise. Or at least, that's what Daffodil had implied she'd do. *Even if she wouldn't do that to me, I still get the feeling she would...*

"Then leave if you want to. We don't know how long it'll be until Brook has another longer outside mission, so I'm taking the chance while it's still available," Violet retorted, looking away from Daffodil. "Besides, I'm curious. I just want to see something."

"I'm not leaving you alone in my mom's office, Violet!"

The look on Violet's face told Forest everything he needed to know. *I'm going to die-* He indirectly leaned into Daffodil, his heart racing. Daffodil glanced at him, vaguely amused. *Daffodil! How is my impending* death *funny?*

She sighed, turning back to Violet. "Okay, that's fine. Can you just...please spend some time with us? You're also our friend." *Is she really my friend, though? I don't think she likes me...and to be honest, if she's going to be like that, then I don't like her much, either.*

*But for Daffodil's sake, I'll try to get along with her...*

Thinking on it, Violet gave in, nodding. "Fine."

Daffodil grinned, already rushing off. "I'll go tell Moth!"

Forest couldn't hold back a smile. *Despite everything, she's always so full of energy. I wish I could be like that.* He tensed up upon hearing Violet's foot steps. She had one of Brook's files in her hands, and her expression was difficult for him to read. *How does Daffodil even understand her? She's so confusing...*

"Is that-"

"None of your business? Absolutely," She replied, not stopping to glance at him. "I plan on returning it before I leave, so don't fret."

Violet walked past him, headed in Daffodil's direction. Forest grimaced, though he remained silent as he followed her. *I still think it's a really bad idea to go digging through my mom's stuff, even if we put it back like it was. We're probably going to miss something and she's going to notice-* He swallowed it down, trying to take in deep breaths. *Not like Violet is going to budge on that. So I did what I could, right?*

*...No, and everyone knows it.*

Moth and Daffodil were in a larger room of the cave, sitting down on a few cushions. Brook had gotten them when Forest was fairly young - though a few were there before Forest was born. The untouched one was for Forest - his favourite. It was embroidered with various star patterns, several of which Forest didn't recognise. According to Brook, she had it long before Forest was born.

*"Where did you get it?"* He had asked her once.

Brook had remained silent for the longest. *"I need some time alone,"* She had eventually said. He could tell her voice was choked up with tears at the time.

He knew she was likely never going to answer, so he never brought it up again. But it was clear to him that the cushion meant a lot to her, so Forest was careful to make sure nothing happened to it. *Besides, it looks really pretty, either way.* As he sat down on the

cushion next to it, he held it in his arms, slightly resting his head on it. Violet instead walked over to the table, opening the file as soon as she sat down.

Daffodil let out a groan. "Violet, what are you doing?"

"Multi-tasking." She didn't look up.

Sighing, Daffodil glanced back at Forest and Moth. "She's more into this than I thought, which was...really, *really* into this. I wouldn't bother with her right now." From the table, Violet let out a snort of laughter.

Moth ignored them both, instead turning to Forest. "So...when do you think your mom will be back?"

Shrugging, Forest dug his chin further into his cushion. "Well, she's probably gathering the rest of the banished and bringing them back here. Do you really think she'd only be gone for a day or two?"

"Well, no...I was asking in case you wanted to stay with me and Chipmunk until she comes back," Moth admitted shyly.

*Oh. So that's what that question was about.* Moth often offered to let Forest stay with him and his brothers whenever it seemed Brook would be out for a while. Forest wasn't exactly sure why he kept offering, especially when Forest was certain he could look after himself at this point, but it did feel nice to know that Moth was looking out for him. *In a way.*

Forest shook his head. "Thanks for the offer, I'll consider it." The genuine grin on Moth's face made Forest's cheeks flush in response. *I...guess he's just happy I'm considering it this time? I can take care of myself, though...*

Daffodil raised an eyebrow. "Seems kind of lonely being here, all by yourself. I know you can take care of yourself, but..."

*It is!* He wasn't going to say that out loud, though - it would just encourage them to offer to come over more or offer to let him stay over. *Well, except for Violet...not like I'd want to stay at her place. Her dads are nice, but she's not.* Forest was used to his mom having to

leave for patrols, and he knew it was part of keeping Valor safe and functioning properly. *I just...wish she'd stay home more often. I don't like worrying about possibly losing her...she's the only family I have.*

"You guys don't need to worry about me," He finally responded, choosing his words carefully. "I have to do Wingwatcher stuff too, remember? And it's not like I'm going to be by myself all the time."

Moth didn't look convinced, but he didn't argue. "Alright, but my offer still stands." *And I'm not going to actually stay with you because I doubt it'll be* that *long, but because I don't want to hurt you, I'm not going to say anything else.*

The uncomfortable silence between them loomed over their heads. *I'm honestly not sure what they expected when they asked to come over. It's not like I try to set stuff on fire on purpose...and it's not really as fun doing stupid stuff whenever mom is out.*

A rustling of some papers caught his attention. "What?" Violet murmured to herself. Daffodil also seemed to overhear, bounding over to Violet, curious. Forest followed her, as did Moth - he really didn't see the point in searching for information on something that was dealt with, but he couldn't deny that he was also curious.

Daffodil looked concerned. "What's wrong, Vivi?"

Violet simply glared at her a bit - Forest guessed it was for the nickname. She instead dramatically flourished her hand at the file. "Apparently Heath had been suspecting something between the Indestructible City and the Wingwatchers a fair amount of time before issuing the arrests." She glanced at Forest briefly. "How did your mom get these documents?"

"Well, I remember her heading off on one of my days off. She said she was 'visiting a friend,' but I guess it was to take her files back from Heath." *Not to mention the look on her face that day...yeesh.*

Moth hummed quietly in agreement. "Heath taking her stuff sounds like something he'd do, yeah."

Closing the file, Violet grimaced, still vaguely surprised. "I'm

honestly a bit shocked, if anything. I think some banishments are related to his paranoia of this specific thing, like Azalea's."

Scoffing to himself, Moth crossed his arms. "Why, though? He always could've lied, like he always does. It's what he did with Pine apparently, and it's what he did when banishing my parents."

Daffodil frowned. "That's definitely a possibility - I think it's mostly just paranoia, but Violet's probably onto something."

"I *am* onto something!" Violet huffed. "I certainly don't remember Azalea or Aster doing anything worthy of being banished - specifically to the public eye."

Moth shrugged slightly. "You could always be remembering wrong. It's been more than a few years since they were banished."

Violet shot out of her seat, glaring at him. "I still think it's worth looking into."

Not giving her a single glance, he walked back over to the cushions. "If you want to waste your time, then by all means, go ahead."

Violet's gaze remained on him for a long moment, which worried Forest. *She probably isn't going to start a fight with him, but...* She rested her forehead on the palm of her hand, prompting Daffodil to lightly rub her shoulder.

"I just want to know what the deal with this is. I want to know the whole thing," She muttered.

Daffodil sighed to herself, nodding. "I get that. I'm not really sure if this is a good idea, but if you want help, I'm willing." *Uh...is it really a good idea to suggest that Violet needs help?*

Letting out a soft exhale, Violet didn't seem angry. "Thanks."

*She...isn't angry, but she doesn't sound okay.* Forest had noticed that Violet had seemed more out of things since being released from prison. *And even more so from Ivy leaving Valor. I can't blame her for that...if my mom left Valor for that long, I'd be upset as well.*

Daffodil smiled at Violet in reply, causing Violet to blush - though a faint smile made it's way on her face. *Wait...I knew they were best friends, but...this feels like it's a bit more than that.* Ignoring the small prick of jealousy, he glanced at Daffodil, hoping for answers. Violet seemed to pick up on it, gesturing to Daffodil.

Groaning, Daffodil took Forest's hand. "We need to talk in private."

Unable to decline, Forest simply let Daffodil drag him into a more secluded part of the cave. *I guess that's one way to get privacy...even though she could've just asked-* He tried to pay it no mind, however. Either way, it seemed like he was going to get some sort of explanation.

He spoke up first. "So...what was that about?"

"I...don't cut me off, alright? I'll explain everything, I swear." *I mean, I wasn't going to, but sure.* She took in a deep breath. "Well...I'll just be honest. I'm not going to be your date to the Wingwatchers dance. I wasn't sure about a lot of stuff and I wasn't entirely sure about how I felt about Violet until...well, Moth decided it would be a great idea to start teasing me about her and Ivy, and then I got worried about her feelings towards me and - sorry about this being really sudden, Forest."

*That was...a lot.* If Forest was being honest to himself, he was at least somewhat frustrated. Wasn't the dance in a few days? *Or at least, it's supposed to be.* Daffodil had initially told him she had to think about it, and even if he now had a solid answer, he couldn't help but feel upset that it ended up being a 'no' after all. *I guess I shouldn't have gotten my hopes up.*

He sighed. "At least you told me before the dance."

Daffodil avoided his gaze. "If you're angry or frustrated with me, I get it. Just...please don't yell at me?"

"I'm not going to yell at you! I just...wish you told me earlier," Forest replied. "I'm fine with being just friends." *Even though I really, really hoped you liked me back, despite me being...well, me.*

Smiling weakly, she chuckled softly. "Yeah, that's fine with me as well."

After a bit of awkward silence ensued for a bit before Forest spoke up again. "So I'm guessing you and Violet are going to dance together, right?" *Does Violet even know how to dance?*

"Yep!" Daffodil nodded, her cheeks flushed. "She's going to be so impressed by my dancing this time, I just know it! I mean, I'm obviously the the best dancer out of me, Ivy, and Violet - Ivy's convinced, but Violet just won't admit it. So I have no doubt that I'll win her over during the dance!"

*I'm not surprised she's been looking forwards to this, whether it's because she'll be dancing with Violet or not. She just really loves dancing, I guess.* Forest wasn't particularly much of a dancer, and only really asked Daffodil because Moth convinced him it'd be a good way to get his feelings across to her. *On the bright side, I don't really have to dance. I'm sure Daffodil would've gotten me to dance if she had been my date...or would I still have to worry about that?*

Daffodil gently nudged his shoulder. "You still plan on going, right?"

"Probably. My mom or Moth will likely end up dragging me there anyways," He responded, unable to wipe the grin off of his face. He vividly remembered how excited his mom had been when he told her that he wanted to become a Wingwatcher - her taking him along with for any Wingwatcher events apprentices were welcome to was something he expected, and always made him feel warm from head to toe when he thought about it.

Daffodil laughed, raising an eyebrow. "Yeah, Moth definitely would do that, too."

Forest frowned at her. "What's that supposed to imply?"

Her only response was more laughter, coupled with her walking back over to Violet. Forest only sighed, though he couldn't help but chuckle to himself. *I just hope mom and the others are alright. And hopefully they get back soon.*

# Chapter 15: Brook

**BROOK**

Brook hauled herself up to another branch, taking a moment to catch her breath. The wind barely grazed against her hair and skin, though it bothered her eyes. She couldn't help but feel a bit cold, however. The apple tree's leaves gently swayed with the breeze. *Moons, I hope none of them fall...* Glancing back down at the ground, she let herself grin smugly as Lark and Petal watched.

"Brook, I swear to the moons that you'll be the death of me!" Lark groaned, clenching her fists.

Petal nudged Lark's shoulder, laughing. "Brook's still intact though, right?"

"Yeah, Lark!" Brook cut in before Lark could reply. "Though I'm flattered that I'm going to end up being the cause of your death. I mean, me, Brook? Really?"

Lark narrowed her eyes. "That's not something you should be proud of and you know it!" She took another step to the tree trunk. "Get down here before you fall!"

Sticking her tongue out at Lark, Brook instead climbed a bit higher. *She worries too much about me. For the moons' sake, I'm a fully fledged Wingwatcher, not an apprentice!* Her gaze now locked on a nearby apple, she carefully made her way towards it. *And besides, she'll be changing her tune once I manage to collect a few apples on my own. Both of them will be so impressed with me!*

Annoyed, Lark crossed her arms. "I think there's a better way to get apples than this."

"Well, this is faster and besides...getting on your nerves is the highlight of my day," Brook replied, smirking at Lark.

Huffing, Lark whipped around to face Petal. "Petal! Convince her to stop before she gets hurt!" She demanded.

Petal shrugged, smiling awkwardly. "Well, everything looks pretty fine right now. I wouldn't worry too much. And besides, Brook's a full Wingwatcher now! She knows what she's doing! ...Or at least, I hope so."

Rolling her eyes, Lark glowered Brook. "If you break anything, I'm not going to pity you one bit."

Brook returned the gesture, grabbing onto another branch. *Oh, whatever. She knows I'm not going to break anything if I'm careful, which I* am being. *Lark's just being a worrywart.* Though she was confident nothing bad would happen, she could somewhat see why Lark would have some concerns. Rose was a far better climber than her, and it didn't help that Brook's main reason for climbing the tree in the first place was to impress both Petal and Lark. *A ridiculous attempt at that, but...*

She reached for a nearby apple, pawing lightly at it. Only her fingertip managed to touch it, but despite that, the apple didn't move one bit. Letting out something of a growl, Brook shifted closer to it on her branch. Ignoring the shaking of the branch, she inched towards it, her heartbeat racing. With a grunt, she swiped at the apple, causing it to hurtle towards the ground. She yelped, now tightly gripping the branch upon seeing the ground. Petal caught the apple, jumping onto her stomach to reach it. Lark gave them both a disapproving sniff.

"Are you both serious? Brook, I hope you know how dangerous that was!"

Petal shrugged. "I think she's well aware, Lark. But do we really need to gather *more* apples? We did this yesterday..."

Catching her breath, Brook glanced at another branch overhead her, eyeing the apples. "It's mid autumn, Petal. We might as well take these before it ends." Carefully grabbing onto the branch, she smiled to herself. "Besides, we'll have some leftover, so we can keep these for ourselves!"

Lark crossed her arms. "That seems incredibly selfish."

"That's why we'll get enough to have leftovers for us! Commander Sparrow won't mind if we get a few without ordering us to," Brook retorted, leaning slightly against the trunk for balance. "So don't worry about it."

Although she didn't look convinced, Lark didn't argue back. Petal gently nudged Lark's shoulder, grabbing her attention.

She grinned awkwardly at her. "Look on the bright side, Lark. We can make our own cider after this!" Petal wrapped an arm around her shoulders, chuckling. "We can throw our own private party, without any adults bossing us around or everyone stealing all the cider before we can get any. It'll be great!"

Lark smiled a little. "That...doesn't sound too bad, actually. I wouldn't mind doing that."

Unable to resist letting out a few giggles, Brook smiled back at them, her chest light and airy. *That sounds like a good plan. I guess this wasn't another ridiculous idea after all!* Brook settled onto a higher branch, eyeing another apple. Hopefully she wouldn't fall out of the tree...

...

Blinking out the dust from her eyes, Brook had to hold back tears as she stared at the charred apple tree. *It's gone. Even the place that meant the most to her is destroyed.* She felt a shudder run through her body - she clenched her fists. *Why couldn't something she loved here at least stay...?* Her shoulders tensed upon hearing footsteps.

"Commander, are you feeling any better?" *Foxglove.* Brook glanced at her, sighing. Foxglove stopped walking, giving her a sympathetic look.

Brook didn't meet her gaze. "Are the others getting impatient?"

Foxglove grimaced. "Well, mostly just Yarrow and Azalea, but that's normal for them, but...we all understand if you need more time, Commander."

Crossing her arms, Brook exhaled softly. "I...see. I apologise for making you all wait for so long."

"Commander, with all due respect, apologising is absolutely ridiculous," Foxglove replied, her tone firm. Brook blinked in shock. "You're human too, and I know you lost a lot when the old town was destroyed. I can't imagine what it's like, but...I can imagine that it has been weighing heavily on you."

*So...Foxglove knows too, huh?* "Was I really that obvious?"

Foxglove shook her head. "No, I just...it's gotten easier for me to tell with you over the years." She gently nudged Brook's shoulder. "And um...Commander? I know you don't like telling others your problems, but...I hope you know that you can always open up to us about it."

*What you mean is, 'Brook, please stop hiding this from me and actually talk to me about it because I care about you.'* But Brook wasn't complaining. While she knew that she should talk to someone about it, she still felt like she would be burdening them with her problems. *And besides...do they really want to hear me talk about my family? Or...Petal?*

"I'll consider it," Brook said flatly, already making her way back towards the ruins. *Barely any of them know who Petal is. I don't want to explain her again...*

She had made it a point to not talk about her family or Petal to anyone, except those who knew them at the time - she didn't want to explain the disagreements she had with her parents, the fights she'd gotten into with her siblings...and it cut her whenever she had to once again acknowledge that she would never reconcile with them. And she especially didn't want to reminisce on Petal - her guilt, her memories, or the time they spent together doing nothing.

*Or the time we spent together with Lark and Rose, when we were all friends...and when our biggest worry was getting in trouble with Commander Sparrow for pulling another dumb prank on Heath.*

Foxglove had rushed to catch up with Brook, now walking by her

side. Brook could practically feel Foxglove's concern radiating off of her - she tried to pay it no mind. *I'm glad she's worried, but...we have more important things to worry about right now.* Climbing over a pile of bricks and charred wood, she carefully made her way down, avoiding stepping on anything that looked especially precarious. Foxglove waited atop the pile, scanning the sky for any dragons. Letting out a quiet hum, Foxglove followed Brook down after a moment of silence.

Brook raised an eyebrow. "See anything?"

She shook her head. "Not really. Odd, considering everything."

*I guess Ivy really was set on changing the world, huh...?* Ivy had explained everything to them later that day, and honestly, Brook still had her doubts. *As in, making it possible for us to peacefully co-exist with them is impossible.* She wasn't going to put Ivy down for it - it wasn't like she could stop her, either. *If she wants to chase a dream, then that's on her. I just hope she doesn't get herself killed...*

Spotting a two figures up ahead, Brook hastened her pace. Foxglove did the same, though she hesitated for a moment. One of them turned around upon noticing Brook - it was Yarrow. He had an impatient scowl on his face that reminded Brook of Azalea's - though he didn't seem too annoyed. Azalea was also with him, now purposefully ignoring Brook. *She's...not going to let that go. And she's not going to let me explain it, either.*

Yarrow tilted his head slightly. "You doing any better, Commander?"

"Could be doing better," Brook replied, her shoulders slumped slightly. "Where'd the others go?"

He took a brief glance behind his shoulder, then turned back to her. "Split up. We didn't know when you'd be back, so we went ahead and made a decision."

*Ah. I'm at fault for that.* She wanted to apologise knew that Foxglove wouldn't like it much if she did so. *And neither would Yarrow, if I'm being honest...* Brook instead took a deep breath, trying to control

her emotions, at least for a brief second. *Just focus on this right now, Brook. Once this is over you'll have an entire evening to yourself to cry into a pillow.*

"I'm guessing they went to get the banished?" Brook eventually asked. He nodded.

"They wanted us to look for anyone else who might've been left here, just in case," Foxglove spoke up. "Pine didn't want to accidentally leave anyone behind."

*That makes sense, I suppose. And Squirrel going with Pine also doesn't shock me...*

Brook glanced at Azalea, who was leaning against a crumbling wall, her arms crossed. "Azalea? Do you mind taking the lead?"

Azalea glowered Brook for a moment before storming ahead, not paying Brook a second glance. *I...* Grimacing, Brook just began to follow her, gesturing to Foxglove and Yarrow to go ahead.

...

Some time had passed since Azalea had taken off. Brook was walking next to her, though any attempt she made to make conversation was ignored or received an eye roll in response. Yarrow and Foxglove were behind them - Brook could overhear their conversation, though she wasn't entirely engrossed in it.

Brook cleared her throat. "*Azalea*. Can you listen to me, just this once?"

She turned around to scowl at her. "Last time I listened to you, you told me you did *nothing* about Heath." Letting out a low grumble, she kicked a pebble across the ground. "I don't care what your excuse is. The whole town of Valor was perfectly content with nothing happening to him, apparently. And besides, I'm sure they don't want me there, either. You heard the shouting to get rid of me at my banishment, didn't you? They don't want anything to do with me, and I don't want anything else to do with them."

As Azalea took off once more, Brook let out a heavy sigh. *I really*

*messed that up, didn't I?* She could understand what Azalea meant, though. She couldn't blame any of the banished for not wanting to return to Valor. *Even if Heath's not the lord any more, his actions are still hurting people. I know there was nothing I could really do, but...*

She felt a hand rest on her shoulder. It was Yarrow, who was still staring after Azalea.

"I wouldn't bother trying to explain to her. It isn't going to change her mind. She's always been really stubborn," Yarrow mumbled.

*Yeah, I can see who you got your stubbornness from, too.* She already knew how stubborn Azalea could be - she had dealt with Azalea as an *apprentice*, for three moons' sake. Brook wasn't going to voice her annoyance, however. It seemed like Yarrow was just trying to be genuine. He had already sped up a bit to catch up with Azalea - she guessed he just wanted to spend more time with her. *Well, even if it isn't the best time, he does deserve it. He hasn't seen Azalea in years, now that I think about it...*

Foxglove was also now ahead of her, her arms crossed. Brook let out a soft exhale. *I miss patrols like this,* She thought absentmindedly. *Ones where there didn't seem to be that many dragons in the sky, where most patrols were us just gathering supplies for the village...* She felt warm just thinking about it. All the trouble she had gotten into with Petal, the dumb inside jokes she and Petal had come up with, Sparrow constantly reprimanding them for their reckless behaviour...even if Brook wasn't the best apprentice, she missed it. *All these current Wingwatchers won't get to understand what it was like back then. And it's his fault.*

"Hmm? Brook?" It was Foxglove. Brook looked up, surprised. "Are you thinking about something?"

Brook shrugged. "Thinking about the old village. And Petal."

Foxglove raised an eyebrow. "Were you both close?"

A sad smile spread onto Brook's face. "Closer than best friends. This place reminds me of all the things she loved."

"Aww." Foxglove returned the smile. "I don't think I'll get *that* kind of feeling for someone, but...I understand what you mean. She sounds nice."

*She was amazing.* Brook let out a quiet laugh, nodding. *I wish Foxglove could've met her. I think she would've liked Petal.* Before Brook could respond, Foxglove stopped suddenly - Brook did the same, confused. She glanced up at the pile of debris in front of her - Azalea stood up top, completely still.

"Azalea? What's wrong?" Yarrow called to her. She didn't look at him.

Hesitantly, Brook made her way towards the pile - she almost slipped, but managed to reach Azalea. A few tears were streaming down Azalea's face. *It...has to be something if Azalea of all people is crying.* Brook glanced down in the same direction as Azalea, inhaling sharply. Below them was a girl who looked about Azalea's age, with dyed purple hair - she had on a torn Wingwatcher uniform, wearing a half sewn tunic over it. The girl looked up at them, relieved.

Azalea was the first to speak. "I-It's Aster."

# PART TWO - Chapter 16: Wren

**PART TWO**

**WREN**

Wren held in a few fits of laughter as Leaf fumbled with his words. *This has to be my best idea yet.* She was sitting down in front of him, reorganising the items in her knapsack. Various items such as books and a few extra clothes she had gotten during her short time in Valor. They were taking something of a break before setting off later in the morning - in the meanwhile, Wren had decided to sort out her equipment. *I'm guessing Ivy begged Sky to take her for a ride...they've been out for a while.*

She was getting somewhat worried about them, but she knew they wouldn't go too far. *And honestly, Leaf would've put up more of a fuss about leaving them both alone if it was dangerous.* There didn't seem to be too many dragons up at daybreak, anyhow. *Or humans, if Ivy's sleeping patterns are anything to go by...*

"...Wren, I don't think I'm saying this properly," Leaf eventually said, grimacing. "Are you *sure* you have the pronunciation right? This doesn't even sound like a word."

Taking off her glove, she threw it at him, scoffing. "Of course I have it right!" *Or at least, I really hope I do.*

Leaf threw it back at her, hitting her in the face. "What does it even *mean*? I don't understand any of it! This is *definitely* more of a you and Ivy thing than a you and me thing, Wren."

Resisting the urge to chuck her glove at him again, Wren crossed her arms. "Maybe, but if you tried harder, we could make it more of a group activity!"

"I think Ivy prefers it being a more one on one thing, if you get what I mean," Leaf replied, a smirk on his face.

Wren rolled her eyes, now smacking his leg with one of her books. "Shut up!"

"Hey, I was just joking!" He yelped, though his protests were riddled with laughter. Once he stopped laughing, he took a moment to catch his breath. "But my other question?"

Glancing around briefly, Wren tried to hold back a grin. "It means hello. You should at least know a basic greeting."

Leaf narrowed his eyes at her. "Now you just sound suspicious."

Wren mocked offense. "Me? Suspicious? How dare you suggest that!"

Only raising an eyebrow, Leaf huffed. "I'm going to ask Ivy and Sky for further confirmation, then."

"Well, you'll find that they'll tell you the same exact thing. It definitely means hello," Wren retorted, glaring at him.

"*See*? Suspicious!" He snapped, pointing at her.

*I am NOT,* She thought indignantly. She went back to sorting out her equipment, not bothering to argue. *I need to finish doing this before tormenting Leaf more, anyways. Hopefully he doesn't* actually *ask Sky what it means...Ivy probably won't know, but she wouldn't exactly like it, either...*

Before long, Wren overheard footsteps rushing in their direction. Glancing from the corner of her eye, she spotted Ivy, with Sky walking alongside her.

"That was *great*!" Ivy exclaimed, bouncing around a bit. "I mean, it's always great whenever we decide to fly, but-"

Sky laughed. "No, I get what you mean. I'm glad you enjoyed it!"

Ivy smiled back at him, also giggling. Soon she came rushing over to them, with Sky following her. She glanced at Wren, tilting her head.

"Oh, were you guys busy?"

Shaking her head, Wren patted on the ground, gesturing for Ivy to sit. Ivy gave Wren a small smile, sitting next to her. She looked over at Leaf, vaguely confused.

"Why-"

"Wren was teaching me some Dragon," He answered before she could finish. "Supposedly, anyways..."

Ivy only seemed more confused. "Supposedly? What does that even mean...? You're either learning Dragon or you aren't."

Wren smirked at him, slightly puffing out her chest. "I believe my point has been proven."

Leaf glared at her for the longest time, then immediately turned to Ivy. "Hey, Ivy. Tell me this - what does *grrroarghh* mean?" Wren froze up. *Crap, I didn't think he'd actually ask-*

"I...don't know that one, actually." Turning to Wren, she pouted a little. "Why didn't you teach me that one?"

*Because I'm not teaching you curse words in Dragon! You would get mad at me if you found out, anyways-* Wren didn't immediately answer, however - she wanted to avoid the possibility of getting caught as much as she possibly could. *I need to phrase this in a way that won't make anyone annoyed, and probably in a way that also avoids Ivy getting more pouty than usual...*

Before Wren could reply, Sky responded first. "Leaf, what was that word Wren taught you?"

"It was something along the lines of *grrroarghh*, I'm sure of it," He repeated. *Oh, come on! He could at least have the decency to mess up the pronunciation!* "She told me it means hello."

Ivy blinked at Wren. "Wait, but- you told me-" Stopping suddenly, she crossed her arms. "*Wren.*"

Wren avoided her gaze. "What do you mean, 'Wren'? All I did was

teach him an alternate way of saying hello." *Yep. That's it. Definitely. Now please stop asking.*

Sky stared at Leaf for a moment, then glanced back at Wren. "*Why* did you teach him that?" *Because I will never not find teaching Leaf swears hilarious-*

Ivy seemed semi-concerned. "Wait, what did you even teach him?"

Grimacing, Wren fidgeted slightly. "I may or may not have taught Leaf a swear. In Dragon."

"Wren!" Ivy groaned.

Inching back, Wren held her hands up. "Hey, I got bored! You can't blame *me* for that, right?"

"I definitely can!" Ivy shot back, shoving her. Wren rolled her eyes, pushing Ivy back.

Sky raised a brow. "How is that even educational? And where did you even *learn* that?"

"How did you learn that word, then?" Wren retorted.

"The same way I learned all that Dragon a while ago, travelling with that group of dragons," Sky explained. "What's your excuse?"

Wren shrugged. "Overheard it from some dragons while looking for you."

Sky sighed in exasperation. "Okay, but that doesn't mean you should repeat it-"

"But how else will I learn it?" Wren argued, a wide grin on her face.

"Um, just so you guys know, I don't mind Wren teaching me swears in another language," Leaf added meekly.

Ivy stared at him quizzically. "...But you don't even know what it means."

Leaf was about to argue, but didn't bother. "Fair. What does it mean, Wren?"

"I am *not* explaining it around Ivy, Leaf!" She snapped, feeling her cheeks heat up.

Ivy's eyes widened. "Is it really that bad?"

Wren shook her head. "No, it's just..." *As one of the less dirty minded of us, I want you to stay that way.* "I really...don't want to explain it. It's...pretty gross."

Her face now a grimace, Ivy glanced at the ground. "Oh. Eww."

"I have a few guesses to what it is, but I'm not saying any of them out loud," Leaf muttered.

Ivy glared at him. "Moons, I'd hope not!"

Leaf laughed, rolling his eyes. "Alright, jeez! Remind me to never tell you any dirty jokes."

"I'll tell you later," Wren replied in a whisper. *Hopefully without Ivy eavesdropping on us.* She looked back at her, raising an eyebrow. "So...how was your flight?"

Ivy's face lit up. "It was amazing! It feels so nice to be up in the air like that!" Leaf was busy cleaning up his sword, but Wren could spot the visible grimace on his face. "It was like I was a bird!"

Wren chuckled. "Well, it does feel like that, yeah."

"I wish humans could fly like that. Wouldn't that be awesome?"

"Hmm...yeah, that actually would sound pretty fun!" Wren nodded; from the corner of her eye, she could see Leaf mouthing 'no.' *At least he's mostly keeping it to himself this time.*

She giggled, glancing up at the sky. "Maybe it's possible?"

*Probably not, but...considering you and Leaf managed to figure out some of what that golden dragon was trying to explain to you...I think you*

*could probably figure it out.* "Maybe."

Ivy hummed quietly. "I wonder how it'd work...I want to find that out one day, I think." *You want to find out a lot of things, Ivy...*

"Well, I bet that you will. If you want to, of course," Wren responded, returning her attention to her knapsack.

Resting her chin on Wren's shoulder, Ivy smiled a little. "You really think so?"

Wren smiled back. "Yeah, I do."

**...**

**a/n: i ended up finishing this chapter sooner mainly because yes it's intended to be shorter (...and because i may or may not have written an entire portion of it during school because i was bored). whatever word Wren taught Leaf can be left up to interpretation, i'll leave it at that**

**and because i probably screwed up my wording in the last note since i wrote it past midnight (i think?), just reclarifying that i'm not going to focus on Wren's chapters as much as there isn't much i need/want to cover before they get involved into the plot compared to Brook (and Rowan i explained in the last chapter's note).**

# Chapter 17: Rowan

**ROWAN**

Rowan woke up to a gentle kiss on the cheek. She opened an eye to see Cranberry, who was smiling at her, albeit tired. Ignoring the heat rising in her cheeks, she lightly pecked Cranberry on the forehead.

Cranberry giggled softly. "Morning, Rowan."

Rowan simply smiled back. "Hey," She mumbled. "How early did you wake up today?"

Playing with her hair, Cranberry shrugged. "Dunno. Close enough to dawn, probably. Why do you ask?"

"I...was wondering if you wanted to go watch the sunrise, maybe?" Rowan confessed, her palms starting to sweat. "If you feel like it, I mean."

Cranberry nodded, yawning. "Of course! Why wouldn't I want to?"

Blushing, Rowan awkwardly looked away. "I just wasn't sure if you wanted to." *Well, and you just woke up...*

Grinning at her, Cranberry began to sit up. "Aw, it's okay. I'm glad you cared enough to ask."

"Ask about what...?" Rowan glanced at Grove, who was barely awake. He had only one eye half open, and he was still curled up against Rowan's arm. *He has no right to be that adorable while sleeping.*

Rowan rustled his hair. "I was asking Cranberry if she wanted to watch the sunrise. Did you also want to come with us?"

Cranberry shook his shoulder slightly, trying to wake him a bit more. "Yeah, it'll be fun!"

He was quiet for a moment, then yawned loudly. "Why so early...?"

"Tell that to the sun," Cranberry replied, huffing. She turned to Rowan. "This is so weird! Usually you're the one fussing when I wake you both up early."

Rowan glared at her. "I do *not* fuss. I just like getting sleep."

Rolling her eyes, Cranberry gently nudged Rowan's shoulder. "Sure you don't." She continued shaking Grove. "Come on, Grove. At least wake up a bit, we have to keep working on the shelters later."

Grove swatted Cranberry's hands away. "I know, I know." He sat up, raising an eyebrow. "I'm just going to fall back asleep though, are you sure?"

A shy smile spread on Cranberry's face. "I'm sure. Besides, I wanted to do the...you know?"

*The what?* Rowan frowned; were they keeping something from her? *I mean, I wouldn't blame them, but...* She attempted to shrug it off. *It's not like I've kept things from others. I don't really deserve-*

*No, I'm not going to think stuff like that. Or at least, try not to, for the time being.*

Blinking steadily, Grove tilted his head. "*That* thing?"

She nodded. "Y-Yeah."

"You sure about doing it today?"

"Of course!" she snapped. Cranberry stumbled over Rowan a bit, heading out of the shelter. "Come on!"

Sighing, Grove scratched the back of his head. "Alright, no need to rush off!" He glanced back at Rowan, shrugging. "She's been looking forwards to this for a while now."

Rowan smiled weakly. "Well, she seems excited."

"Oh, she *is*," Grove replied, a weary yet charming grin on his face.

Rowan felt warm upon seeing it - there was just something about his smile that made her feel more at ease. She wasn't entirely sure why, but she wanted to guess it just made her feel better when he seemed to be happy.

She tilted her head, raising an eyebrow in a teasing manner. "I can tell you are too, in that case. You've been smiling a bit more recently."

His cheeks flushed. "You...noticed that?"

Rowan held back a few giggles. "Well, duh! We've been friends since we were *fourteen*, Grove. I'm bound to notice something like that by now."

He leaned in, kissing her on the forehead. "I suppose so." He gestured for her to head out of the shelter with a wave of his hands. "You should leave first. Cran's probably getting impatient."

"Heh, you both are just spoiling me with kisses today," she mumbled, while making her way out of the shelter. *They must be planning something, then.*

Crawling out of the shelter, she cast a glance towards now put out fire without thinking of it - it had become something she'd grown used to doing. Camellia sat closest to it, her head occasionally jerking upwards whenever she started to nod off. *Did...did she stay up all night again? I appreciate the effort, but...* Next to her was Mallow, who was sound asleep on her shoulder. *At least one of them got some sleep.*

Camellia's attention immediately turned to Rowan. "Oh, you're finally awake," she muttered, though any trace of annoyance in her voice was overshadowed by her weariness. "This is really unusual for you to wake up at a somewhat decent time, you know."

Rowan just sighed. "Morning to you too, Camellia. Did you get any sleep?"

She was about to snap at her, but simply shook her head. "...Not really. Why do you care?"

"Well, even if you're unbearable, you're still my sister. I don't want anything happening to you," Rowan admitted with a shrug.

Crossing her arms, Camellia glanced back at Mallow. "And *I* don't want anything happening to Mallow. She's not going to sleep in the shelters until everyone here can sleep in them, which is absolutely stupid, but I can't stop her from doing it."

Rowan tried to stop herself from smiling. "That's...the most open you've ever been with me, I think." Camellia huffed, refusing to look at Rowan. "Alright, alright. Just...make sure you get some sleep, okay? We'll make sure nothing happens to Mallow while you sleep."

Camellia groaned. "You promise?"

"Of course! She's my sister too," Rowan replied, attempting to push back the irritation. *She's actually listening to me. I think she's just really tired, but...* "Now go to sleep."

Camellia rolled her eyes at Rowan, but said nothing in response. She instead returned her attention to Mallow briefly before resting her head on her arms, not bothering to lay down. *That...looks painful but at least she's making an attempt to sleep.*

Rowan took another glance around their small, set up camp. No one else seemed to be up - Bluebell and Tadpole were presumably still asleep in their shelter, while Thyme was sleeping from across Camellia and Mallow. They had decided to take turns with the other shelter, where Mallow and Camellia would sleep in it after Rowan, Grove, and Cranberry did. *Or at least...if Mallow would actually sleep in the shelter.*

*Either way, most of us are getting some form of sleep. Thank goodness for that...*

Grove soon came out of the shelter, his shoulder brushing up against Rowan's. He gave her a searching look. "You alright?"

"Hmm? Oh, yeah. Just thinking."

"That's alright." He walked towards Cranberry, who was leaning against a tree trunk, stretching her arms and legs. "Cran, really? We

weren't going to be *that* long!"

Cranberry laughed sheepishly. "Sorry! Just used to doing my morning stretches as soon as I get outside."

With a sigh, he sat down nearby her. "At least you're committed, I guess." He gestured to Rowan. "Over here! This seems to be a nicer spot."

Rowan headed towards him - he didn't seem to be wrong. It didn't have as much morning dew soaking it, and didn't have too much dirt in the way. She laid down next to him, resting her arms behind her head on the log behind her back. Grove just rolled his eyes slightly, hardly moving or saying anything. Cranberry hurtled herself to Rowan's other side, curling up on Rowan's lap.

She giggled. "You make for a nice pillow, Rowan..."

Scoffing, Rowan lightly nudged her. "Oh, shut up!"

Giggling some more, Cranberry said nothing else, though she continued shifting around. Rowan held back a sigh. *If she wants to cuddle with me, she can just say it.* She wasn't going to say it out loud, though. It was cute on its own right. Rowan glanced up at the sky, resisting the urge to fall back asleep. Grove let out a quiet yawn, stretching his arms.

Cranberry glanced up at him, narrowing her eyes. "Are you seriously falling asleep now?"

Grove rolled his eyes at her. "I'm *tired*," he replied, sighing expressively. "And it's not like Rowan is doing much better."

"Rowan? Come on, not you too!" she cried, puffing her cheeks out.

"I'm *trying*!" Rowan weakly protested, attempting to smother the yawn that came immediately afterwards. "This is difficult."

Crossing her arms, Cranberry scoffed. "Normally I'd be offended, but at least *someone* is trying." She shot a pointed glare at Grove, who was already beginning to doze off.

He groaned. "Hey, I'm also trying my best!"

Holding back a snort of laughter, Rowan smirked at him. "I know, Grove." Grove's expression was something of a smile as he glanced away from her, looking slightly flustered.

"I'll believe it when I see it," Cranberry muttered, though she seemed just as amused. After a moment of silence, she sat up, stretching her arms. "I won't deny that going back to sleep is pretty tempting, though."

*So you're aware that it's hard not to fall back asleep...* Rowan bit back her frustration. She didn't want to potentially ruin the moment between them. *Besides, who knows when we might get to spend time together like this again...*

No one had said anything as they sat quietly. Rowan gently rustled Cranberry's hair as she nestled back onto Rowan's lap. She sat up, laying her head on Grove's shoulder. He smiled at her, leaning in to give her a small peck on the forehead. Rowan felt fuzzy as he wrapped his arm around her shoulders. *They really care about me, even though I don't deserve it.*

*And despite that, I...* "H-hey, guys?"

Cranberry glanced up at her. "Yeah?"

Grove also turned to face Rowan, pulling back slightly as he tilted his head. *Well, it's now or never...*

Rowan took in a deep breath. "I...um. I know we're having a moment and all, but I just wanted to tell you both that I think I love you."

She avoided sharing their gazes, feeling the heat rushing to her face already. *That was so out of nowhere to them, wasn't it? I probably sounded so ridiculous-* She felt a finger gently turn her head back towards them - it was Grove, who had a grin on his face.

"Hey, hey - you don't need to be embarrassed, Rowan," he said, trying to hold back a few chuckles. He glanced at Cranberry, smirking. "I told you she'd say it before you."

"Oh, shut *up*. Maybe I changed my mind that Rowan would say it first. You don't know!" she argued, pouting. Cranberry sat up, nodding at Rowan. "But yeah, don't be embarrassed about it! It's very sweet that you finally decided to admit it."

Rowan stared at Cranberry for a moment. "...Wait, what do you mean by 'finally'?"

Stifling a giggle, Cranberry covered her mouth with her hands. "You're very obvious, Rowan. Anyone can tell that you're in love with us."

Crossing her arms, Rowan scoffed. "Okay, maybe I'm a little obvious, but *anyone*? *Really*?"

Grove raised an eyebrow at her. "Bluebell, Camellia, and Thyme can all tell. And I'm sure even Leaf noticed *something* going on between us at some point, you weren't ever discreet about it." *Even when we were teenagers? I...want to doubt that, but...*

"Fine, but that's not *anyone*," Rowan retorted, swatting his hand away. He laughed in response. She glanced at Cranberry. "Was this what you were planning? You were going to tell me that instead?"

Cranberry's cheeks flushed. "Y-yes. Well, I was going to speak for both Grove and myself because no matter what, I'd be lucky to get him out of bed!" Grove cast an annoyed glance at her, but still had a smile on his face.

Rowan giggled. "That's really sweet - I mean, I was suspecting you both have felt that way for a while, but...still. Thanks." *For being there for me.*

# Chapter 18: Brook

**BROOK**

Azalea had already jumped down from the ledge before Brook could say anything. Not that Brook really felt like she *could* - she was still in disbelief, despite what she was seeing. Aster, who she thought was still waiting for a chance to get into the Indestructible City if not dead, was standing in front of her. *I...I can't believe it.* Disregarding Aster's more disheveled appearance, she seemed mostly alright.

Aster gave Azalea a slightly shocked smile. "You're still alive."

"Of course I am," Azalea shot back, her voice laced with worry and relief at the same time. "I was more worried about you. I mean, going off to the Indestructible City on your own like that? That was practically a death wish, you idiot!"

Chuckling lightly, Aster nodded. "True. But I'm here now, aren't I?"

Scoffing quietly, Azalea let out a heavy sigh. "If it weren't for the fact that I'm happy you didn't end up dead and that we're out on the surface, I'd absolutely chew you out right now."

Brook wanted to say something, but remained put on the wall. *Azalea wouldn't appreciate it much,* she thought. *And the others should know, anyways.* She glanced behind her back to see Foxglove standing as close as she could to the base of the rubble, Yarrow nearby her.

Foxglove raised an eyebrow. "Something happened?"

"I..." *How exactly do I word it? 'Remember Aster? Yeah, she's alive, apparently' doesn't seem appropriate right now.* Brook instead gave her a slow nod. Foxglove seemed to get the hint, making her way up the pile.

Once Foxglove reached Brook, she let out an almost inaudible gasp. "She's alive?"

Aster seemed to notice Foxglove, glancing up at them. "Commander? Foxglove? You guys too?"

Brook carefully made her way down, grunting - Foxglove did the same, albeit almost tripping over her own feet. Aster ran up to them, much to Azalea's annoyance. Brook tried to ignore it, keeping her gaze on Aster. Foxglove stood next to Brook, brushing off the small bits of rubble on her uniform.

Foxglove had a sad smile on her face. "I thought you died, after what Pine and Azalea told me. I never thought..."

"Heh, I guess that makes sense. Especially after...you know who," Aster laughed awkwardly. "But I didn't think that some of the banished would still be alive. Or that you'd still be with the Wingwatchers!"

Azalea scowled lightly. "Of course she's still a Wingwatcher! It's not like we suddenly stopped working on that plan once you left."

Her cheeks flushing slightly, Aster let out one last chuckle, albeit sounding somewhat forced. "Yeah, I suppose so."

*Is something up with her? Even when she laughs when something makes her uncomfortable, it doesn't sound that forced...* Brook didn't have much time to question her about it, however. *I can ask her later, if she decides to come back with us.*

Brook cleared her throat. "I'm glad to be catching up with you, Aster, but I really don't think now is the best time."

With a nonchalant shrug, Aster nodded. "Sure. I mean, it only makes sense to head back instead."

Not waiting for a response, she began making her way back up the wall. *She's just as impatient as she was before her banishment. I'm glad to see that not everything has changed, but...* Brook glanced at Foxglove, who just sighed quietly as she shook her head. Azalea only cast Brook an annoyed glare as she followed Aster. *Really,*

*Azalea? Is it really the time for that?*

Brook didn't comment on it; there were more important things to take care of. *Namely, rejoining the others, making a plan on how to get everyone safely back to Valor, explaining the 'oh yeah did you guys know Aster isn't dead' part...*

"Commander?" It was Foxglove.

Nodding, Brook exhaled softly. "I'm still here. Let's just go."

...

Upon reaching the others, Brook stopped momentarily to take a look at the crowd. It wasn't too many people, which surprised Brook - Heath had definitely banished more people than that, hadn't he? *Maybe this is just a few of them, and they didn't want to put everyone at risk,* she tried to reassure herself. She really didn't want to think of the other possibility, which was beginning to make her feel sick. Azalea had already rushed up to the crowd, while Yarrow remained chatting with Aster, a wide grin on his face. *He'll definitely be in a better mood after this, I suppose.*

Foxglove's gaze was on Pine and Squirrel, looking concerned. Brook turned to face them as well; almost immediately she could tell why. Squirrel's face was pale, and his entire body was shaking. Pine stood next to him, practically propping him up. *Oh moons,* she thought, feeling a rush of terror run down her spine. *What happened?* Foxglove walked over to them, Brook following her.

Foxglove glanced at Pine. "What's wrong?"

Squirrel spoke up before Pine could explain. "I...my parents, they..."

"Oh, Squirrel," Foxglove whispered, taking his hands. "You don't deserve that. I'm so sorry."

He let out a choked up sob, squeezing Foxglove's hands. "I don't know how I'm going to tell Chipmunk and Moth. I don't think they'll take it well..."

*And they're not the only ones who've lost people because of Heath. I*

*don't know how many people have had to go through this because of him, but...*

*He really needs to pay it back to them somehow. I need to figure out a proper punishment for him soon.*

Pine wrapped his arm around Squirrel's shoulders. "I promise I'll be with you when you tell them, alright?" Squirrel only gave him a weak nod in response.

Foxglove turned to Pine once more. "Was it...because of what I think it is?"

"Yeah," he muttered, shooting a glare at the sky. "*Them*."

*More victims of dragons because of Heath.* Brook held in a sigh, while also struggling to hold in her rage. *I could just say Heath killed them, and it'd be accurate.* She rested her hand on Squirrel's shoulder, rubbing it gently. It probably wasn't much, but she felt like she had to try and comfort him regardless.

She frowned, also looking at the sky. How long until the next dragon would come, soaring overhead? Threatening their lives, and the safety of Valor? *I don't get why Ivy thinks that things will ever be okay between us and them. Even if they are sentient, Heath gave them a reason to hate us and they've always seen us as prey. They've killed our families, friends...*

Brook didn't want to focus on that, though. She glanced at Pine. "Is this everyone?" she asked, her voice hoarse. Though she felt the real question was, 'Is this everyone who's left?'

He grimaced. "Everyone who's coming back. Heath...really hurt a lot of us. And the others either left the ruins, or..." Brook didn't have to take too long to guess what he meant. *Dead. Gone to this world.*

*And Heath probably hoped for it, too.*

"Understandable," she replied after a long moment of silence. "I assume you're coming back to Valor, then?"

Pine nodded. "I've been forced away from my boyfriend and best

friend for years now, and finally have the chance to come back. I can't give that up, no matter how much I hate Heath."

Brook simply gave him a curt nod in response. *I don't know if I'll ever be able to repair everything Heath's done.* She turned to Foxglove, exhaling softly.

"We should start brainstorming a plan on how to get everyone back to Valor safely."

Pulling away from Squirrel, Foxglove sighed. "I know, commander." She furrowed her brows, her gaze scanning the small crowd. "Perhaps splitting up into groups of two or three is the best option. And if possible, then I say the groups head out at different times. It might take a while, but I feel it's a safer option."

Grimacing, Brook took her hand off of Squirrel's shoulder and crossed her arms. "Good plan. I assume you'll be assigning a few Wingwatchers per group?"

Foxglove looked shocked for a brief moment. "We're actually going through with my plan? Without discussing alternatives? U-uh, alright then. Sure, if that's what you want?"

*Well, we don't have unlimited alternatives right now, and out of everyone here I trust you to have the best judgment about these things.* Brook just nodded, turning her attention to Azalea. She was sorting out the crowd, casting a few wistful gazes at Aster. *It's now or never.*

As Brook came over to Azalea, she tried to steal her nerves. *She probably won't want to talk, but...this might be the last time we see each other.* Azalea noticed Brook before she could get a word in.

"Are you going to try and convince me to go back again?" Azalea muttered, an edge to her voice. "Because I already told you, I'm not coming back. Not even if Aster goes back."

Brook shook her head. "No. I know you don't want to go back, and I don't blame you, honestly. I'm not going to force you to do anything you don't want to do, Azalea. You're a full Wingwatcher and an adult now, aren't you? It's your choice."

Azalea's expression of surprise quickly faded. "I...yeah, sure. Thanks for that, I guess."

Trying to hold in her smile, Brook gently patted Azalea's back. "No problem." *Even if you refuse to see me as your commander now, that doesn't mean I'm not going to stop caring about you and your safety.*

She scoffed, despite the small grin on her face. "Whatever, Brook."

Brook glanced at the crowd. It looked like there were around fifteen people at most, the youngest person looking around seventeen years old. *Around the same age as Pine was when he was banished. How many years have they been here?* Brook tried to ignore the question, but her mind continuously wandered towards it. *They might be one of the youngest Heath's banished, I'd bet.*

With a sigh, she gestured to Foxglove, Pine, and Squirrel to come over. *This will be over soon,* she told herself. *Just don't think about how there's a high chance that we might die, even though I'm thinking about it right now and-*

*I need to stop* thinking *like that.*

...

Brook let out a heavy sigh once her feet touched the ground. It had taken most of the day, but they had gotten all of the banished back to Valor. *Or at least, everyone who wanted to come back.* She glanced around, frowning. *I'll have to properly get everyone settled in now, huh...*

Something tapped on Brook's shoulder. She turned around to face Pine, who wore a grimace.

"Should I help out? I don't want it to seem like I'm already shirking my work."

She shook her head. "You don't have to. You just got back from being banished, I don't think anyone would blame you if you took a few days off." She took a brief glance at Squirrel, who was resting his chin on Pine's shoulder, a miserable expression on his face. "You too, Squirrel."

Pine's gaze darted between the banished and the other Wingwatchers. "You sure?"

"Absolutely," she replied. Thinking about it a bit more, she added, "In fact, I'm making that an order. Go rest, the both of you."

Relieved albeit hesitant, Pine took Squirrel's hand and led him towards their former cave, Brook assumed. *I'll check up on them later,* she decided. *And Moth and Chipmunk as well, if I can find them.* She turned to Foxglove, who was helping an older woman down the ladder. Aster was also nearby, talking with Yarrow - Wintersweet awkwardly stood next to them as ve counted the small crowd near the exit. *I'm grateful to have them with me. I don't think I could do this without their help.*

She walked over to Aster, clearing her throat. "So, Aster...where do you plan on staying for the time being?"

Aster blinked in shock. "Oh, I haven't thought much about that. I'm guessing that my place isn't available anymore, huh?"

"Most likely," Brook sighed. *If she came back with the intent of returning to Valor, surely she'd think of where she plans on living? I mean, seriously...Heath would happily remove any evidence of your existence if it benefitted himself.* "Either way, where do you plan on staying? It doesn't have to be permanent, you know."

She shrugged. "No clue. I could probably live on the streets just fine. I mean, it's just one big cave, right?"

"You will not!" Yarrow snapped. "Aster, I don't know what you've been through since your banishment, but you deserve better than that!" He looked at Brook, a pleading expression on his face. "Brook, she could stay with me in the time being! Maybe you could convince my dad to let her stay for a while?"

Brook frowned. "I'm going to ignore the fact that you *should* be addressing me as your commander for both of our sakes. Either way, you still live with your parents. You'd need to discuss that with them and make room for Aster."

"Hey, I appreciate the offer, but I don't want to burden you or your parents," Aster cut in, sighing. She glanced at Brook. "Could I stay with you for a few days? I know for a fact that you have the space, and it's not going to be that long, I don't think."

*I should hope so!* "I...guess so. I don't see why it'd hurt, and I don't want to deny anyone help. As long as you try to find other options in the meanwhile, you can stay."

Aster looked shocked for a moment, then smiled. "Seriously? I'm surprised you agreed! Don't you still have that kid to take care of?"

Brook raised an eyebrow. "You mean Forest? He's fourteen now, I trust that he can handle being by himself every so often." *Can he, though? I know he can take care of himself, but...I can't help but worry, now that I think about it.*

"Really? Huh. I thought you'd spend more time with him considering how you treat the younger Wingwatchers, but I guess I thought wrong," Aster mumbled, just loud enough so Brook could hear. *I...what is she insinuating? I try to spend as much time as I can with Forest...don't I?* Before Brook could question Aster, she let out a breezy laugh. "I'm excited to see him again, though! It's been so long...wasn't he around eight years old when I last saw him?"

"Nine, actually." Brook tried her hardest to ignore Aster's remark. She wasn't negligent of Forest, was she? "I'm surprised you remember him. He wasn't really good at talking with older people." *I still don't think he is, honestly...he tries to avoid his Wingwatcher teachers whenever possible and it shows.*

She chuckled. "Well, he *did* have that habit of accidentally setting things on fire! ...Or does he still have it? I don't know."

"Well, only when he cooks, but..." Brook went quiet after a moment, her gaze slowly widening. "*Crap*."

"Wait, what does that-"

Brook buried her face in her hands, groaning. "I didn't make anything that he can easily warm up himself, damn it-"

Aster placed a hand on her shoulder. "Hey, I'm sure it's not that bad. He knows how to cook, right?"

"Not without burning himself!" Brook shot back, already whipping around. She took a moment to spot the direction of her cave and began running. *Please be alright, I don't think I can handle the stress if he did get himself hurt-*

*I should've known better than to leave without properly making sure he was alright, or maybe I shouldn't have left him alone at all.* Brook tried her best to ignore the thoughts as she made her way to her cave, but it was a lost cause. She knew all too well that those thoughts were inevitable. *But still...*

Brook immediately knocked on the door when she reached her cave's entrance. Her breathing was short and heavy as she waited for an answer. *I should just go in,* she told herself. *But he might be okay.* Brook didn't particularly want to dwell on that, though. She glanced anxiously around the area. *Stop panicking, Brook. He's fine.*

There was no answer. Brook sucked in her teeth. *He's not coming, is he?* She grabbed the door handle, ready to burst it open - at the same moment, the door began to swing open. Forest stood on the other side, panting slightly. He was hunched over a bit, and part of his tunic and pants was stained a shade of brown that made Brook want to grimace.

"You're okay, thank the moons," Brook sighed, relieved. "I was so worried about you, I didn't leave anything for you to warm up in the meanwhile."

Forest hugged her. "I was more worried about you!" He pulled away, frowning at the stains. "Erm, sorry."

Brook laughed quietly. "That's alright. I'm just glad you're okay." She raised an eyebrow at him. "So...those stains?"

"Um."

"And don't tell me something else just to gross me out. Be honest with me, Forest."

He huffed. "You're no fun." Glancing behind him and then back, his frown grew wider. "I tried making soup?"

*I shouldn't be as terrified as I am right now.* "I...you tried making soup."

"Yes."

"On your own."

"You make it sound worse than it is!" he protested, glaring at her. Forest crossed his arms, casting a glance over his shoulder. "I didn't make *that* much of a mess, anyways."

Brook held in a sigh, taking a few steps inside. *He's safe and not hurt, that's all that matters to me right now.* Her gaze turned to the kitchen's entrance, which had a few towels placed on the ground. She grimaced. *He says he didn't make that much of a mess, but if he has to use more than one towel to clean it...*

Forest scoffed, gesturing to it. "I told you it wasn't that bad!" He picked up one of the towels, peeking underneath it - before Brook could catch a glimpse at what was underneath, he immediately dropped it. "Okay, it might need to dry off a bit more, but..."

Letting out a snort of vague amusement, Brook rolled her eyes. "At least you're making an effort to clean it up." She eyed the floor, still frowning. "I have to go over a few things first, but I'll help you clean up once I'm done. Just clean as much as you can in the meanwhile, okay?"

He tipped his head. "I mean, I was going to do that anyways, but sure. Why'd you mention it?"

"I don't know if you remember her, but Aster's staying with us for a bit. I don't want her to have to walk through this mess."

A look of bewilderment was plastered on his face. "Wasn't she banished? Or considered dead?"

*So he remembers that as well.* "Y-yes. She's staying in Valor, and she'll be living with us until we get the whole living situation sorted out."

Forest didn't speak for a while, seeming to be deep in thought. Brook felt her heart skip a few beats. *I didn't say the wrong thing, did I?* She tried to push the worry aside - he probably had a lot on his mind, too. *I should probably change the topic.*

"So...what have you been up to while I was gone?" she asked, headed in the direction of her office. Forest was next to her, his hands covered in dirt. *Just...just what did he put in that soup?*

He shrugged. "I hung out with Daffodil, Violet, and Moth for a bit. I didn't do much, honestly."

Brook raised an eyebrow at him, opening the door to the office. "Daffodil and Moth I understand, but Violet? I didn't think you two were friends."

Grimacing, Forest didn't meet her gaze. "Oh, we're not. Daffodil just really likes being around Violet and insisted she hang out with us as well." He crossed his arms, looking away. "It's nothing, really."

Almost immediately Brook could tell he was lying - she didn't answer, instead heading into her office. *He's clearly jealous of Violet. Can't say I blame him, I know that feeling all too well...* She glanced around the room, narrowing her eyes. The room seemed mostly the same before she left, though a few papers looked as if they had been messed around with. She frowned - someone had *definitely* been in her office while she was gone.

"*Forest*," she began, her tone stern. Forest jerked his head up, taken by surprise. "Did you go in my office while I was gone?"

He cringed away. "Uh...no?"

She inhaled sharply. "Forest, I'm not asking you again."

His shoulders sagged. "I may or may not have been blackmailed by someone into telling you that no one went to your office. And that someone may or may not be Violet."

"Thank you for being honest with me," she sighed, rearranging the papers on her desk into a neat stack. *Seriously, Violet? You can't always resort to blackmail like this, and it isn't even your business to*

*begin with...* "I'll...have to have a chat with Violet. And her dads."

Forest's face fell. "Please don't punish her! I don't want her getting angry with me about it, and Daffodil will probably get angry as well!"

Brook wanted to groan, but kept it in. "I'll just bring up the constant blackmailing to them instead, is that fine?"

He scowled. "You're still going to bring it up," he muttered. "But fine."

Before Brook could say anything, Forest left, slamming the door. *I messed that up,* she realised, beginning to panic. *He's...not going to want to talk to me for at least a few hours.* Brook didn't have much time to dwell on it, however - the knock on the door told her that much.

"...Come in."

Soon after, Aster came in, a slightly worried expression on her face. *Did she hear any of that? Moons, I hope not...* Brook stood up, pushing the papers to the side.

"Did you guys have a fight?" Aster asked, tilting her head. Brook only nodded, gesturing for Aster to come further inside. "That explains his surly expression, I suppose. Was it a bad time to come in?"

Brook shook her head. "No, no. Feel free to make yourself home. Sorry about the mess, though."

Aster laughed quietly. "Don't apologise, it's alright." She looked around the office, humming to herself. "So this is what your office looks like? I've never gotten the chance to see it until now. I have to say, it's a lot more pleasant than the nightmare I remember being told back in my apprentice days."

*Nightmare? Is that really what the apprentices thought of my office back then?* "Well, I'm glad to inform you that it definitely isn't a nightmare," Brook replied, letting out a small snort of laughter. She grimaced at Aster as she turned back to her. "Still though. Are you

sure about staying with me and Forest in the meanwhile?"

She let out an expressive sigh. "I told you, commander. I'm sure about staying. Besides-" She began to exit, pausing to glance behind her shoulder. "-I'm sure I won't be here long."

The door closed after Aster, leaving Brook to gather her own thoughts. Brook leaned onto her desk, exhaling deeply as she stared at the paperwork in front of her. *I need to catch up on this later.* Picking up a paper, she skimmed its contents, then tossed behind her shoulder. *But that can wait. I need to get everyone else settled, help Forest clean up and hopefully make amends with him, talk to Violet and her dads...* She took another deep breath, digging her nails into the wooden desk.

*And talk to Aster about what happened to her since she left the ruins.*

# Chapter 19: Brook

**BROOK**

It had been a couple of days since the patrol had returned from the ruins. Brook had managed to get most of the formerly banished settled into their homes, or at least their homes for the time being. *Well, with Lark's help...* Brook wasn't exactly pleased with the fact that she ended up needing Lark's help after all, but she was grateful that it was another opportunity to spend more time with Lark.

She was sitting at her desk, resting her head against her palm while rubbing the crust out of her other eye. Across from her was Lark, who was busy sketching out plans for the construction of a few new caves. It was one of the projects that Brook and Lark had been discussing in greater detail as of late, and was one that Brook was perfectly happy to let Lark take the lead on. *I don't really do too well with the planning part. I'd rather just help construct the tunnels and caves...*

Lark hummed softly, chewing lightly on the tip of her quill. "Maybe...like this? But...actually, that might be worse."

"Hmm?"

"Oh, it's nothing," Lark responded nonchalantly. "Just thinking out loud."

*Does she want help, or...?* "Well, alright then. How much longer until the sketch will be done?"

Lark shrugged. "Hopefully by the end of this week. You know how picky I am with these."

Chuckling, Brook leaned back in her chair, stretching. "Yeah. But that's what makes them so precise, right? Take all the time you need, a detailed sketch that's somewhat late is better than a rushed one."

She let out an amused snort. "I wouldn't say they're *that* precise, but...I'm glad you think so."

Brook huffed. "It's not me thinking they're precise, it's because they *are*." She took her own quill, tapping it gently against the desk. "Either way, I'm not going to worry about it too much if that's the case."

Lark opened her mouth to argue, but was quickly cut off by a knock on the door. Brook almost shot out of her seat. *I don't have any meetings today, and it's already afternoon...who is it and what do they want?* Lark seemed to have a similar reaction, perking up. She swept some of her hair to the side, leaving a small streak on her forehead. *Well, at least she's less stressed about this project than some of the others...*

"Who's that?" Lark spoke up first.

Brook glanced back at her, frowning. "I have no idea. I didn't have any meetings scheduled today, unless you want to count our daily sessions together as meetings."

She scoffed, rolling her eyes. "We don't even schedule those, though."

"Exactly, that's my point," Brook responded. She got up, albeit warily. "This is just odd, but I'll check anyways."

Lark didn't say anything, but Brook could tell by the grimace on her face that nothing needed to be said. She quickly looked away, burying herself back into her blueprints. Brook held back a sigh and turned her attention back to the door. *Thank you for the reassurance, Lark...* Hesitantly, Brook began to open the door, her palms already beginning to sweat.

"Who is it and what do you want?" she immediately asked, ignoring how much her voice was trembling. *Moons, I hope it's not one of the Wingwatchers...I am* not *about to be made fun of for the rest of my life.*

There wasn't an immediate answer, but instead, lots of muttering and shuffling footsteps. Before Brook could repeat herself, the door

opened partially, revealing Forest.

His expression was one of bewilderment and annoyance. "Mom, some messenger came to see you. He said he's from the Indestructible City, I think?"

*The Indestructible City? What do they want with us?* All Brook really knew was that Heath was incredibly paranoid about them after a few messengers had come for him, and claimed that the lord had sent an assassin after him. That was all she cared to remember, if only for the fact that he claimed she was involved with them. *Besides, the legendary Dragonslayer is nothing now. What does the lord even want from me...?*

Forest's gaze darted around her office warily. "Did you want me to tell him to go away, or...?"

Brook inhaled sharply. *Might as well listen to what he has to say.* "No, I'll speak to him. Where is he?"

"Waiting at the front door," he replied, already taking off. *He's...still mad about me telling Violet's dads about the blackmail, isn't he?*

Another sigh escaping her lips, Brook glanced back at Lark, who was trying her best not to listen in.

"A messenger from the Indestructible City came into Valor," Brook explained, although she had the inkling that Lark already knew. "Can't imagine what it's about."

Lark let out a quiet gasp. "Seriously? You'd think they'd stop coming once they heard Heath's not the lord any more..."

Brook snorted. "Apparently not." She began to make her way out the door. "You want to come with me? Might be entertaining."

She jumped out of her seat, glaring at Brook. "Well *now* I have to, if you're going to act so dubious about handling it!"

"I promise you, no yelling will be involved!" *I'm not your husband.* She almost said that out loud, but was relieved she stopped herself from doing so. *I really do not want to have that discussion with Lark*

*until we're* both *ready*.

A doubtful glare was cast on Lark's face, but she said nothing. *Does she know what I was about to say?* Brook pushed the thought away, not wanting to focus on it. She headed to the front door, with Lark behind her. *Argh, did I upset her too?* The front door was already open - the messenger was standing right outside of the doorway, Aster right next to him. Brook narrowed her eyes at them both.

Aster noticed it first, now smiling awkwardly. "You look upset, is this a bad time?"

She just raised an eyebrow at Aster before turning to the messenger. "You," she began, pointing at him. "What do you want? I hope your lord knows that the Dragonslayer isn't available at the moment."

He nodded shakily. "O-of course, ma'am." Taking a moment to steel his nerves, he looked her straight in the eyes. "The Invincible Lord wishes to form an alliance with you, Lord Brook."

*Lord Brook? Does he have to make this sound even weirder than it already is?* "I...the Invincible Lord wants an alliance. With me."

"Well, technically with Valor if we want to be specific," he mumbled.

Brook tilted her head at him. "What for? I'm not sure what that place wants with us, especially now of all times."

The messenger shrugged. "I can't say for certain about the time, ma'am. All I really know is that he wanted an alliance with you. Against the dragons, of course."

*An...alliance against the dragons. First the idea of allying ourselves with them, and now fighting against them? When did the world suddenly become filled to the brim with morons?* She clenched her fists. Didn't anyone see that things were never fully going to change? Dragons would never stop murdering humans, and humans would never rise against the dragons. That was a simple fact of life that anyone with common sense would learn at the early age of three.

*No matter how much we get along with them or fight them, nothing will*

*bring our families and friends back. No amount of forgiveness or vengeance will give my parents, siblings, or Petal back.*

"He wants a *what*-"

"A-an alliance, ma'am."

"Is...is your lord actually that *stupid*?" she breathed, trying her best to keep her anger from boiling over. "Has his previous messengers not told him how we're the survivors of a dragon attack caused by our previous lord's greed? Does he not realise how idiotic it is of him to request that, especially after we're just barely starting to recover from the crap Heath put us through?"

Before Brook could further lash out at him, she felt someone tugging on her shoulder, pulling her back. It was Lark, who shot Brook a fierce glare before turning to the messenger. She gave him an apologetic look.

"I'm sorry, she just...needs a moment. I'm sure she'll give you an answer soon."

Aster's expression morphed from one of shock to one of disgust...and rage, Brook guessed? "She'd better." She glanced at the messenger, gesturing to him. "Come on, I can show you around town in the meanwhile."

He didn't look at her. "I-I'm sorry, I didn't know-"

"Don't apologise," Lark cut him off, immediately shutting the door. She whipped around to face Brook, staring her in the eyes. "What was *that*?"

Brook immediately looked away. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Yes, you do." Lark purposefully stepped back into Brook's line of sight. "I've lived with Heath for several years, Brook. I think I can tell when someone is about to explode by now."

*Don't start comparing me to that piece of-* "So what if I'm angry? I'm rightfully so. Leave it alone."

Lark furrowed her brows. "You and I *both* know that messenger wouldn't deserve being yelled at, no matter how justifiable your anger might be." She took a brief glance at the door before turning back to Brook. "Why are you so angry right now, Brook? I know you well enough to figure out it isn't just the lord duties."

Brook refused to meet Lark's gaze, already beginning to storm off to her office. "I said *leave it alone*."

"Brook, I'm serious. If I can talk to you about my problems, then you can talk to me about yours."

"You of all people should know why!" Brook snapped, whipping around to glower Lark. "All these stupid ideas that we can get along with dragons or that we could fight against them are ridiculous! I'm tired of hearing how we can fight back or get along when it's clear that nothing will ever change, and that it won't bring our loved ones back." *It's not going to bring my mom back. It's not going to bring my siblings back. It won't bring Petal back-*

Lark stared at her in shock. "I genuinely hope you aren't referring to my daughter when you say that."

Brook met Lark's gaze for a single moment. "No offense, Lark, but your daughter doesn't know shit about what Pyrrhia's actually like outside of Valor. All she has is her idealistic goals because of you and Heath sheltering her. There is no way in hell that three teenagers and a dragon that just *happens* to be friendly will change anything." Before Lark could argue with her, Brook started to shut the door. "I told you to leave it be. I'm not going to repeat myself for a third time."

"Brook, you can't just-!" Slamming the door shut, Brook blocked out the rest of Lark's words. She slumped to the ground against the door, her head hitting the wooden frame. Wincing, Brook tried to ignore the throbbing pain. *I shouldn't have said that. I absolutely should not have said that at all.*

Brook wasn't going to apologise, though. *At least, not right now. Neither of us are really in the mood for that, I'd guess.* Outside of the head pain, Brook could feel her body burning with rage. She dug

her nails into the dirt, not even bothering to keep her groan of frustration quiet.

Inhaling sharply, Brook got to her feet, walking to her desk. "I'm not going to apologise for saying the ideas of fighting against dragons or getting along with them are both stupid, though," she muttered. "I mean, do people actually expect me to consider either option after everything they've done to Valor?" *After everything they've done to me?*

She was about to bury her head in her hands before noticing the dirt that had already dug its way into her nails. Grimacing, Brook slammed her hands onto her desk, sending a few papers flying to the ground. *I'll...clean those up later.* Her gaze wandered over to the chair Lark had been sitting in - her blueprints were still laying on the seat. *Oh...oh. I'll have to give these back to her.*

Brook glanced back at the door. *She's not going to want to talk to me right now.* Her thoughts drifted back to what Lark had said earlier - her expression quickly turned into a scowl. *And maybe I don't want to talk to her right now, either.*

She sighed to herself. "At least I know the answer to one thing."

...

Brook dragged her feet along the cold road, her entire body feeling heavy. It had been a few days since the messenger had come, and Lark was still angry with her (though to be fair, Brook was equally mad if not more so). Forest was somewhat willing to talk to her, though he was still annoyed. Aster was livid with Brook since she gave her response to the messenger - anything Brook would say to her would simply be ignored. *At least the other Wingwatchers are somewhat willing to chat with me.*

*Except for tonight, I suppose.*

It was the day of the Wingwatchers dance - which Brook normally wouldn't mind at all, if it weren't for the fact that most of the Wingwatchers would be there. Brook didn't particularly feel up to going and had left it in Foxglove and a few other older

Wingwatchers' hands to organise it, even though she was well aware she should be there. *And even then, I really don't feel like doing much else. Lark still doesn't want to talk to me...*

Usually Brook would visit Lark sometime before or during the dance, but she knew that Lark wouldn't want to see her and wouldn't bother with trying. Her gaze wavered between the various cave entrances, a few being lit up with flickering torchlight. Brook folded her arms and kept walking. *At least some people seem to be having a good evening.*

She glanced back up - she was headed in the direction of the lake. While she knew it wasn't the best spot to stay at for too long, she didn't particularly feel like staying in her cave. As she grew closer, she could make out a shadowed figure sitting by the shore - they were unmoving for a moment, until a sudden flash of movement caught Brook's eye. The sound of a pebble flying into the lake immediately followed. *Seriously?* Brook cleared her throat as she walked up to them.

"What are you doing?" she asked sharply.

The figure turned around to face her - it was Heath, who's surly expression became even more sour upon meeting Brook's gaze. "What business is it to you?"

Brook couldn't stop herself from curling her lip. *Perhaps this was a mistake.* "You're essentially a criminal all on your lonesome at the dead of night sitting nearby one of our main sources of water doing who knows what to it. As the lord, I have every right to question you."

Heath rolled his eyes. "You're not *my* lord. I can do what I want."

Before Brook could snap at him, he turned his back to her, reaching for the small pouch laying next to his side. He took out another pebble and chucked it out onto the lake. *I don't think that's how you skip stones, but whatever.*

"It would not have hurt you to tell me that you were skipping stones on the lake, Heath."

"I don't have to tell you anything," he muttered, now refusing to glance back at her.

Brook ignored his remark and sat down next to him, sighing. He raised an eyebrow at her, but said nothing. She rested her chin on her arms, folding them on top of her legs. Outside of the sound of skipping stones and the muted chatter coming from the nearest caves, there wasn't much else to distract Brook from her own thoughts. *But this might be better than trying and failing to get Lark's attention, or having to deal with Forest avoiding me for the entire night.*

Her gaze flickered briefly to Heath. "Why are you even out here so late?"

Heath narrowed his eyes. "Why aren't you at that Wingwatchers dance or whatever?"

*Oh, wow. He actually remembered that.* "I'm surprised you remembered it was tonight. Was it because you were genuinely interesting in keeping an eye on your daughter's activity as a Wingwatcher, or because someone pestered you about remembering it?"

"It's not like she's a real Wingwatcher any more, so I don't care," he shot back, flinging another pebble into the water with slightly more force. *Is he lying about that or does he mean it? It's hard to tell with him, especially when it comes to Ivy.* "But you are, I guess. So why aren't you there? Did you quit yet?"

"Absolutely *not.* The day I retire from the Wingwatchers will be the day I die." Brook tried to keep herself from raising her voice too much. "Maybe it hasn't occurred to you yet, but people other than you also deal with personal struggles."

Heath gave her a harsh glare. "I *know* that!"

*Mhmm, and the burning of the old village didn't happen.* Brook had to restrain herself from saying anything in response that would make Heath want to punch her more than he likely already did. *Still, a slight change of topic might be for the best.*

"I answered your question, now answer mine," Brook began, clearing her throat. "Why are you here?"

Heath shrugged in a disgruntled manner. "Had another fight with Lark and I didn't want to see her for the rest of the night."

Brook sat up slightly, forcing herself to keep her gaze fixated on the lake. "You both fight with each other a lot," she observed flatly. *I sure wonder who instigated it this time.*

He tossed another pebble into the lake, his throw noticeably weaker. "I guess so," he eventually replied, seeming unsure of what to say.

She didn't respond - it was already beginning to become more awkward by the minute. *But he is aware they fight a lot? Does he not want to try and prevent that from happening so much, or...?* Brook wasn't going to press him to answer that, however. He clearly didn't seem to be in the mood to discuss it further, and if Brook was being honest, neither was she. *At least he's beginning to acknowledge that it's not exactly normal, I suppose...*

*But that still doesn't change the fact that he still treats everyone around him like crap.*

Nothing much was said between them for a long while - which Brook felt was kind of nice, or at least as nice as it could be considering she was with Heath. *I guess he's not going to push my nerves as much as he normally would.* Heath had stopped skipping stones after a couple of minutes, now laying on his back. His eyes were half shut, so Brook guessed that any further attempts at conversation would just be ignored. *Not that I mind. His voice is grating anyways.* Brook exhaled softly, leaning further into her arms. Maybe she could just relax at the lake until the dance was over.

"Commander!"

Brook immediately perked up; it was Daffodil, wasn't it? Heath also seemed to overhear, groaning quietly as he sat up. She looked behind her shoulder to see Daffodil and Violet rushing over to them, an equal mixture of terror and anxiety on both of their faces -

though Violet's expression was more subdued, as if she was wearing a mask. They stopped right in front of them, breathing heavily.

Daffodil was the first to speak up. "I-is it a bad time right now?"

Getting to her feet, Brook rose an eyebrow at them. "Of course not, what's wrong? I thought you two were at the dance."

She grimaced. "Well...sort of? We were sitting at the lake for a bit for some privacy."

"Yeah," Violet chimed in, nodding. "We were just heading back but then-"

"We think we saw someone leaving the caves unattended, and I'm not sure who but they looked really suspicious!"

*Are they just overreacting? I mean, I wouldn't put it past them, but...*
"Elaborate."

Daffodil glanced at Violet hopelessly. Violet just sighed, inhaling sharply. "I think they left the dance. They were headed from one of the exits to the cave it's in."

"Hmm...well, I still have my doubts about it being too serious, but...that is odd." Brook frowned. She didn't put anyone on any outside night missions, did she? *I think some of the Wingwatchers who do the night shift are still at their posts, if anyone is still working. And I don't usually like sending people outside to do it...* Brook ignored the shudder that ran down her back at the thought.

Violet glared at Brook for a moment, but immediately tore her gaze away once she realised Brook had noticed. Besides Violet's frustration, Brook could sense the terror radiating from her. Daffodil also seemed to notice, taking Violet's hand and squeezing it lightly as if to calm both of their nerves.

Daffodil turned back to Brook. "Can you at least check it out with us? We wanted to see for ourselves, but-" She leaned onto Violet protectively. "-I don't want everything to repeat itself."

*Ah. That explains why they came to me first, then.* "Alright, take me to

where you last saw them. Hopefully it's just nothing." She gave them a curt nod, signaling to them to go ahead. Daffodil and Violet shared a worried look before heading in the same direction they came, still holding hands. Brook glanced at Heath briefly, frowning. "Are you planning on staying here, then?"

Heath let out an unamused snort. "It's not like it's my job any more, is it?"

"That implies you actually did your job," Brook shot back. She threw him one last dagger before rushing to catch up with Daffodil and Violet, not bothering to see his reaction. *Well, regardless of how he feels about it, it's true.*

Daffodil and Violet were nearing one of the clearings that was a fair distance away from the cave that held the Wingwatchers dance. It was close to the lake, and connected to a couple of tunnels, some leading to the surface. *That...that's just great. Do either of them remember which way they saw this person?* Brook skidded to a halt once she spotted someone else in the clearing, looking deeply concerned. She could barely make out their face in the torchlight - the light, chestnut-brown hair and grey-green eyes both told her it was Moth. He seemed to notice them as well, rushing over towards them.

Moth's attention was on Daffodil at first. "Hey, Daffodil, have you seen Forest?"

"Not at all...why? I thought he was dancing with you tonight," Daffodil replied, tilting her head slightly.

He shrugged, nodding awkwardly. "Well...yeah, but we got worried about you and Violet since you guys were taking a while to come back. So we decided to go and check, but-"

"-You and Forest split up, and now you can't find him," Violet finished, raising an eyebrow. Moth just sighed and nodded again, shoving his hands into his pockets. She glanced back at Daffodil. "Are you...thinking what I'm thinking?"

Daffodil inhaled shakily. "Y-yeah, but I don't like it." She turned to

Moth, now visibly shaking a bit. "You're sure you couldn't find him, right?"

Moth's gaze nervously flickered around the various tunnels. "I would've found him by now. I'm sure."

*Forest, he...? He's not...?* Brook felt a rush of terror running through her chest, her legs beginning to give out a little. She forced herself to keep standing, her palms sweaty - her breathing was short and heavy.

*He's gone. Forest's gone.*

# Chapter 20: Ivy

**IVY**

Ivy could barely contain her excitement. Well, that was often nowadays, but it was definitely true now. Her hair whipped around her face as she felt the wind brushing against her skin. She tightened her grip on Sky's back spikes, leaning into it slightly. She had grown used to doing this after a couple of practice rides with Sky, though she didn't particularly think much about holding onto them in the moment. Next to her was Leaf, who was also clinging onto it. *Is he okay?*

"Leaf, are you doing alright?" she asked, being careful as to not bump into him much if at all. Even if he was still going refuse to admit being afraid of anything, Ivy could tell at a glance that he was clearly uncomfortable.

His only response was a shudder, his eyes still shut. Ivy frowned, leaning towards him a bit to gently pat his shoulder. He cringed back for a moment, but relaxed a little once he seemed to realise it was just Ivy. She held in a sigh, scratching his shoulder lightly. *I wish we could figure out something to help him with this.*

She smiled a little, even though she knew he wouldn't see it. "Don't worry, Leaf. I'll let you know when we reach the ruins."

He quietly scoffed. "You don't need to *do* that," he muttered. "But thanks, I guess."

Ivy held back a small snort of laughter. "Aw, you're welcome." She glanced around for a bit, tightening her grip on the spike. She could spot parts of the ruined village from where they were, as well as the temple where they had stayed in during the Wingwatcher arrests. Even in the evening light, Ivy could still make out the charred buildings and scorched land. *How many people died in the attack...?* She couldn't stop herself from wondering. *How many people died here since Dad banished them?* Forcing herself to look away, Ivy had

to take a deep breath. *Don't look at it. Don't.*

"D-did something happen?" Leaf asked.

"Huh? Oh." Ivy wasn't sure how to respond. *And I don't think he wants to hear about my stupid problems, anyways.* "I think we're landing soon."

Leaf clutched onto the spike harder. "Okay."

He didn't speak much for the rest of the flight. Ivy didn't really feel like sticking around anyone at that moment, but she didn't want to leave Leaf on his lonesome. *I think I'd just feel worse if I did that,* she thought. It didn't help that she felt bad about enjoying the flight while Leaf was clearly miserable, either.

In front of them was Wren, who was chatting with Sky for most of the flight. Ivy really wanted to talk with Wren on the way to the ruins, but she guessed Wren would probably want to talk with Sky more. *I get it, honestly...it's not like I haven't had days where I'd rather spend time with Daffodil over Violet, or Violet over Daffodil...* She glanced back at Leaf. *And I don't mind spending more time with Leaf, but it's kind of hard to do that when he's currently fearing for his life.*

Once they landed, Ivy got off of Sky's back immediately after Wren, turning around to wait for Leaf. She was standing next to Wren, who just had an eyebrow raised at him.

"Did you tell him we were landing, or...?" she muttered, leaning in further so only Ivy could hear.

Ivy nodded awkwardly. "Yeah, why do you ask?"

Wren didn't answer, instead climbed back up Sky's back, taking him by surprise. She crawled over to where Leaf was sitting, a furrowed expression on her face. Ivy could barely make out what was going on, but she could've sworn she saw Wren yanking on his shoulder sleeve. Before long, Leaf had opened his eyes, now carefully following Wren down Sky's back. Ivy grimaced at him once he was fully on the ground.

"Do you need to sit down for a bit, Leaf?" she asked.

He immediately plopped down onto the ground, a spot with several bushes behind him. "A bit is subjective," he groaned, clutching onto his stomach.

Ivy wanted to go over to comfort him somehow, but she felt a gentle tap on her shoulder. She looked over her shoulder to see Wren.

Wren frowned. "He'll probably throw up, I recommend waiting to talk to him until he does that first." She glanced around the small section of the ruins they were staying nearby. "We can camp here for tonight. How long did you plan on searching over here?"

"Well...the ruins are pretty big, so I was hoping for a day or two after tonight? If you're fine with it," Ivy replied, already fiddling with her thumbs.

She shrugged. "I don't really like it, but I suppose it's not for too long. As long as you don't purposefully delay us, I don't really care."

*Well, that was...blunt.* At least Ivy had a guaranteed answer. Most of the time when Ivy had asked Wren, her answers consisted of variations between 'I don't know' and 'I have no interest in having this conversation Ivy why do you keep *asking*'. ...Perhaps the latter was a bit of an exaggeration, but that's what it *felt* like to Ivy. She didn't want to focus on it, though. It just made her feel more annoyed with everyone and feel worse about herself.

Regardless, she had an answer - only, she was pretty sure she *wasn't* going to find the golden dragon in two days. If she was being honest with herself, she much rather have at least three days to search. But she knew how Wren was about staying in one place for too long, and really didn't want to have that sort of argument with her.

"Hey, Pyrrhia to Ivy? Hello?" Wren bumped Ivy's nose lightly, grabbing her attention. "You zoned out for a minute there."

Ivy laughed awkwardly. "Just thinking." She took another look at the evening sky - already the sun had been beginning to set, and a few stars were now visible. "Do you think I could go look around for

a bit right now? It might save us some time."

Wren slowly raised an eyebrow at her. "Are you just saying that because you know I'm not happy about the amount of time we're spending here?"

Her smile morphed into an odd grimace. "I kind of just wanted to check tonight as well, but...a sliver of that *might* be true."

"Well now I think it definitely is!" Wren cried. She let out a quiet exhale. "Look, I won't get mad at you if you say you want to stay a bit longer. I'll definitely be annoyed and more anxious about it than I want to admit, but not mad. I can tell how much this means to you."

Ivy couldn't stop herself from grinning. "Aw, thank you Wren!"

Wren let out a vague snort of amusement. "No problem." From behind her, Sky let out a few giggles. Looking slightly flustered, Wren turned around and huffed. "Oh, stop that!"

*Seeing them get along like this is amazing.* Ivy knew that it wasn't anything new to see Sky and Wren getting along well, but it still made her oddly happy to see dragons and humans getting along. *I know it's a stretch to think it, but...maybe one day this could be the relationship between more humans and dragons?*

*I sure hope so, but...*

She didn't want to think about that more than she had to. While she still had believed that maybe there was a way, she couldn't stop remembering how most of Valor reacted to Sky - especially Commander Brook's reaction. Or the burn scars she remembered seeing on Grove during the brief moments she had met him - those had to be inflicted by a dragon, hadn't they? *Maybe not any time soon.*

"I should probably wait for Leaf," she stated, hoping a change of topic would push those thoughts away. "Since he wanted to find the golden dragon too."

Wren slowly raised an eyebrow at her, then turned to face the

direction Leaf was sitting in. "I'm not so sure if that's the best idea."

Ivy glanced over in the same direction - Leaf had disappeared, though judging from the rustling in the bushes, he was simply sitting behind them. She tried her hardest not to grimace. *Still, if those are thorn bushes? Ouch.*

"I know, but still...he wanted to come with me for that reason." *Or was he just saying that because he knows I'm searching for that dragon?* She tried to shrug the thought off.

Shrugging, Wren took a brief glance at the sky then back at Ivy. "It's already getting pretty late, even if it's closer to summer. You might want to head out while there's still natural light."

Ivy sighed. Wren was probably right. "Alright, alright. I'll head off soon and I'll make sure to come back before too long." She glanced awkwardly in Leaf's direction once more. "Is he going to be okay, though? He doesn't sound like it..."

"If he's feeling up to it, I'll send him after you."

*So I'm going to be all on my own while searching for the dragon?* Even though Ivy was used to being on her lonesome, she wasn't sure how much confidence she had in herself to go into the ruins on her own. *Well, it's only part of the ruins,* she reminded herself. *You and the others are going to search more thoroughly tomorrow, anyways.* Still, she had only really been in the ruins with others.

*Regardless, I really don't want to waste Wren's time with this dumb talk.*

Ivy just gave her a nod. "Okay then. I probably won't be too long, anyways."

"I should hope so," Wren replied, amused. She began to make her way towards Sky, but stopped suddenly to turn back to Ivy. "Oh, wait!"

"Hmm?"

Wren was now holding her sword, which was currently in its sheath. "Since you're heading out on your own, you should probably

take this. F-for protection purposes, of course."

*I'm not at all good with a sword, though...* She didn't want to decline Wren's offer, however. *She normally wouldn't go out of her way to do something like this.* Gently taking hold of it, Ivy smiled at Wren.

"You're being so nice to me today!" Ivy teased playfully. "I'm pretty much useless with a sword, but I suppose it wouldn't hurt to take it with."

Wren avoided meeting Ivy's gaze, rolling her eyes slightly. "Well, of course! Leaf and I can help you with it once you come back." *This won't change the fact that I'd still be awful with a sword, but...* Wren gave her a slight nudge. "You should go now."

Ivy simply gave her a curt nod and began making her way further into the ruins after slinging the sword sheath's strap onto her back. *I know they're worried about me, but I'm more worried about them.* She pushed the thought aside, beginning to haul herself up onto a small pile of rubble. *Focus, Ivy. Focus.*

From what she could tell, they were staying somewhere near the temple. She didn't have enough time back then to get a full map pictured in her mind, nor did she now - though she vaguely recognised a few spots. *If I'm going to be quick about this at all, then it might be better for me to just go this way.* She grimaced at the waste that lay in front of her. *Even if there might be less rubble in the temple.*

She jumped down onto the other side of the pile, just barely managing to land on her feet. Her feet aching slightly from the drop, she took a look around her surroundings. Several now torn down walls had debris clustered around them, all varying in how much they had been scorched. Most of the land was sprinkled with soot and ash.

*My dad caused this,* she thought sadly. *And he doesn't feel one bit guilty for it, either.* She still couldn't help but feel guilty for his sake. Even though she knew it wasn't her fault, she still felt like she could've at least tried to do *something.*

Ivy tried to ignore the swelling guilt and the smell of singed grass

tingling in her nose. *You need to* focus*, Ivy.*

"I should probably take a route with more rubble," she mumbled to herself, already eyeing another wall of debris. "I won't get spotted as easily by a dragon." *Hopefully.*

...

Shifting through the debris was even more tiring than Ivy had initially thought. Her hands were covered with scratches and were sore, and she was pretty sure she had gotten more than a few splinters. She had finished climbing over one last wall, which had sapped most of her energy. She was now panting heavily, resting against it.

*I...I need a break.* She glanced up at the evening sky. It was beginning to grow darker, and Ivy could spot more stars than she ever could through the sky holes in Valor. She smiled to herself. *Even in a place like this, the world still manages to be beautiful.*

*Well, as beautiful as it can be when I could be spotted and eaten at any moment.*

Ivy scanned the sky for any sign of flight or any colours that stood out in the sky's evening glow. All she could see was the reds, oranges, and blues of the sky. *No golden dragon.* She frowned, rubbing her eyes. *At least it's pretty.*

She got back up to her feet, groaning as she heard a few of her bones crack as she stretched her arms and legs. *I need to keep moving.* As she began to make her way towards the next few piles of rubble, an odd flash of movement caught her eye - she couldn't quite tell who or what it was. *Maybe it's the dragon!*

Making sure not to snap any sticks, Ivy began to creep towards the same direction she had seen it. *Hopefully it doesn't notice me or run away.* She knew she shouldn't get her hopes too high, or bet that it was definitely the dragon, but if she had managed to find the golden dragon now, she could start putting her plan for human-dragon peace in motion! ...Or at least, the barebones of the plan she had in mind (she already had another plan that Ivy personally

thought was foolproof and was totally possible, but if she was going to be working with Leaf and hopefully Wren and Sky for peace, then she *guessed* she had to take Leaf's criticism seriously). Before Ivy could think further about it, she could hear more rustling. *This is it!*

She quietly began to climb the pile, making sure she didn't reveal herself too much if at all. Her hands twitched with excitement, and suddenly, she wished she had her drawing materials. Or any drawing materials, for that manner. *Maybe I could coax Wren into letting me grab some from Valor...we aren't terribly far from Valor, are we?*

A soft noise quickly grabbed Ivy's attention - she perked up, attempting to locate where she had heard it. *It had to be something close to me, otherwise it would be even quieter...* she concluded. Before long, Ivy could spot more movement coming from in front of her. Her heart racing, she backed down a bit. *Maybe this was a stupid idea.*

"I could hear you from a mile away. Get down here and show yourself." Ivy had to take in a deep breath upon hearing the voice. *It's...Azalea.*

She had thought that Brook would've come for the banished by now, or that Azalea would've decided to go back to Valor on her own. Did something happen? *Is Pine with her, then?* Ivy desperately hoped so. She knew it was rude of her, but she really didn't enjoy being around Azalea much. Every time she was around Azalea, Azalea either promptly ignored Ivy's existence, or couldn't help but make a barbed remark at some point. *Do I really want to talk to her?* She glanced behind her shoulder - maybe she could make a run back to the camp without Azalea catching onto her.

As Ivy was about to climb further down the pile, she heard the unsheathing of a knife. "I know you heard me. Get down from there, or I'll get out you down myself."

*I don't really have a choice, do I?* Rather reluctantly, she retraced her steps up the pile and carefully climbed down on the other side. She stood against the rubble, making sure she was able to make a quick

escape if needed. *I hope not, but...it's Azalea and I can tell she's in a foul mood, if I didn't already sour it...*

Azalea raised an eyebrow at her. "Huh, I wasn't expecting the princess to make a return so soon. Your grand quest fail already?"

*Does she have to be so rude about it?* "N-No, that's not...I'm just searching for something."

"Don't you have anywhere else to look?" she replied snippily.

Ivy looked down at her feet. "I was just making sure."

"Hmm." Azalea gave a sharp sniff in response. "Well, you'd better hurry it up. I don't want you leading any dragons back to the others, friendly or not."

Grimacing, Ivy nodded. "O-okay. Got it." She managed to hold Azalea's gaze for a few seconds before averting it. "Did the commander come to bring the banished back? I've been worried about you guys since."

The look on Azalea's face told Ivy all she needed to know about how Azalea felt towards Ivy's question. *'You have no right to be worried,* princess*,' is the main feeling right now, isn't it?* Ivy simply braced herself for Azalea's words.

Azalea shrugged. "Oh, she did. Pine went with them, and a couple of the others went too. I'm not going back though."

"Why not? I thought you guys would be alright with going back now that Heath's not the lord," Ivy asked, trying her hardest not to say 'my dad' instead of Heath - especially not in front of Azalea, of all people. *At least Commander Brook brought some of the banished back to Valor.*

The former Wingwatcher's gaze hardened. "Then you thought wrong," she snapped. "Did you really think just removing Heath as the lord would fix everything? That it'd make everything alright between us banished, him, and the other citizens of Valor?"

Ivy tried to take a step back, but remembered the wall of rubble

behind her. "N-no, but-"

"But what? He still *hurt* people, Ivy. He got several people killed, and most of the people in Valor supported it. He deserves more punishment than what his fourteen-year-old daughter thinks is best for him," Azalea went on, struggling to keep her voice down. "I can *never* go back to a place that supported that horrible man and wanted me dead for whatever excuse he pulled out of thin air to get rid of me, my friends, or my family."

*I-I...* Ivy wasn't sure what to say to that. Or if she even should respond to Azalea's words. *Is it my fault for not doing anything more?* She didn't need to answer her own question - she felt both she and Azalea knew the answer. *W-was I being selfish by not demanding that the people of Valor banish him? Or even...execute him?* She wouldn't be surprised if some people in Valor would've preferred that - after all, Heath's banishments were as bad as executions. Ivy knew that Heath didn't care what happened to the former citizens that he banished. And Heath had been entirely willing to execute the Wingwatchers, including her best friends.

*Would he have been willing to do the same to me? Regardless of whether I'm his daughter or not?* She couldn't help but wonder about that. She ignored the tears beginning to well up in her eyes. *I'm not going to think about that right now.*

Ivy glanced back at Azalea, who had been staring Ivy down. *Is she waiting for an answer?* Ivy couldn't tell what Azalea was feeling - her expression was mostly unreadable, though she could detect a few hints of anger from before.

"Get out of here," Azalea said, breaking the silence. "I don't want to see you here again."

*I don't want to see you again, either.* Ivy was about to wave out of instinct, but stopped herself from doing so. *I don't want to be here any more, anyways.* She immediately scrambled back up the pile, ignoring the tears beginning to splatter onto her cheeks.

...

Ivy wasn't sure what she was going to tell Wren, Sky, and Leaf when she got back. She didn't want to tell them about what happened with Azalea, and she certainly didn't want to start crying in front of them, either. *Well, scratch that,* she thought, wiping away another tear. *I don't want to cry even more in front of them.*

As she neared the camp, she took the sword sheath from her back in her hands. She felt a little better holding it, but she felt awful that she hadn't even used it at all. *Not like I know how.* A few more tears fell from her face and onto the sheath - she grimaced. *Hopefully Wren doesn't notice.* Ivy could hear their voices from where she was standing.

"Are you sure? She's been gone for a while now." It was Leaf. *Is he feeling any better?* She frowned. *I probably didn't help at all by going off on my own.* She inched a bit closer, trying to get a better look at them.

"Leaf, I'm sure she's alright. It's getting late anyways, so she wouldn't stay away for too long," Wren replied noncholantly. "I told her that it was fine for her to take a quick look around the ruins before we actually search tomorrow."

"Well, either way, I hope she's alright," Sky sighed. "Didn't she say she doesn't know how to use a sword?"

Wren nodded. "Yeah. I gave her mine since I was kind of worried about her being on her own, but-" She stopped suddenly, glaring at Leaf. "-I know what you want to say. Do *not*."

Leaf was trying to hide the smirk on his face. "I wasn't going to say anything."

Ivy looked away. She wasn't exactly sure what they were talking about, but maybe it wasn't the best time to interrupt. *Besides, I don't mind waiting. I don't really feel like explaining why I was taking so long, or crying...* She grew more restless as she continued watching, however. *I don't want to make them even more worried about me, though.*

With a sigh of resignation, Ivy stepped into the clearing, catching

their attention. "I'm back," she announced flatly.

Leaf had rushed over to her, much to her surprise. *Should he be doing that?* He smiled at her, though the look in his eyes clearly screamed 'Ivy where have you *been* I have been worried sick over you.' "You had me so worried. I was about to go out to find you myself, but Wren said you'd be back soon."

"And I was right!" Wren huffed, crossing her arms. She had a book in her lap, and was leaning against Sky.

Ivy laughed awkwardly. "Sorry that I worried you guys. I didn't mean to take so long, I promise." She walked over to Wren, placing her sword next to her on the ground. "Here's your sword back. I-I wasn't really sure how to use it, so I never took it out of it's sheath."

"Ivy, I know you have trouble with swords. It's alright-" she stopped mid-sentence, narrowing her eyes at the sheath. Ivy winced. *She noticed.* "Ivy, why are there...tears on my sword?"

Ivy didn't answer right away. Or rather, she didn't answer Wren's question. She tried to keep her gaze away from both Wren and the sword, not wanting to potentially start crying even more. As the heavy silence dragged on, she felt a hand touch her shoulder, gently rubbing it. Ivy looked up to see Leaf, who had a sympathetic look on his face.

"Did something happen?" he asked softly.

Ivy blinked a few times, then sighed as she nodded in response. "I don't want to talk about it," she eventually managed to choke out.

Albeit a bit hesitant at first, he leaned in to give her a hug. "Okay then, you don't have to." She didn't hug him back, but she felt a bit better as he embraced her. *I'm glad he's my friend.*

As he pulled back, she glanced up at Wren, who had an unreadable expression on her face. Wren didn't seem to notice at first - she seemed lost in thought.

"Wren?"

Wren turned to her, somewhat taken off-guard. "Yeah?"

Ivy blinked back a few tears. "Are you...upset about the sword?"

"What? Of course not!" Wren took Ivy's hands, looking considerably more focused. "Ivy, please don't feel bad about the sword, alright? Whatever happened out there is more important to me right now."

"I don't think I want to talk about it right now," Ivy replied, though she felt it came out more as a whine if anything.

Wren lightly squeezed Ivy's hands, taking her by surprise. "I know, and I get that." She paused for a moment, her gaze darting around nervously. "I know I'm probably sounding hypocritical right now, but whenever you're feeling ready, you can open up to us, alright? I think I speak for everyone here when I say that none of us like seeing you so upset."

Ivy couldn't stop herself from smiling, just a bit. "You mean that?"

She let out a snort of amusement. "I do."

"I...thank you for that, Wren. I kind of needed it," Ivy chuckled quietly, sniffing a little.

"You're welcome." Wren eventually let go of Ivy's hands, though she left their fingers entwined for a bit. Ivy looked away, still smiling. *Even though Azalea's right about everything I did back in Valor, I...I'm glad they'd all still be willing to listen to me. I'm glad I met them.*

# Chapter 21: Tadpole

**TADPOLE**

Tadpole groaned quietly to himself as he followed Bluebell. It was evening, and already they had been tasked to do something for the group. *Not that I'm complaining. Some dragons are hopefully asleep as of now, and it's not like Cranberry would purposefully endanger us.*

*...Or at least, endanger Bluebell.*

Despite trying to reassure himself that Cranberry wouldn't do that to him, he struggled to believe it. He was a former dragonmancer apprentice, wasn't he? He could always be lying to the group about his intentions, and have ulterior motives. He could hurt people again like he did to Grove. Or as Camellia put it, he could be a spy for them. Why wouldn't Cranberry take up the opportunity to get rid of him?

*Probably because Bluebell's the only one who really talks to me, and Rowan would lose it if Bluebell got hurt...* Which was something Tadpole *also* didn't get that much. Sure, he was around her age, but what made him worth spending time with? He held in a deep exhale, adjusting his grasp on the two blueberries in his hands. He didn't want to answer that question.

Bluebell let out a long, exasperated sigh. "Can you believe they sent us out to go berry picking this late? It's ridiculous! I don't see why I can't just go to sleep while Camellia does it instead."

"Why Camellia specifically?" Tadpole asked, though he was pretty sure he already knew the answer. 'Because Camellia is just the worst!' was often the reply he got.

She scowled. "Because whenever the six of us used to go berry picking together, Camellia always had a hoard of blueberries that she never shared with the rest of us! So clearly she knows where to get the best ones."

Tadpole was mildly surprised by the different answer, but not by much. *If she isn't complaining about how Camellia is the worst, it's about something that Camellia did that she hates.* He didn't mind it much, though. It was better than forcing himself to make small talk with Bluebell.

He hummed quietly in response. "Maybe we should've asked if she could come with us."

Bluebell snorted and rose an eyebrow at him. "Nah, she'd just complain the whole way." *But...isn't that what you're doing right now?* He kept his mouth shut and let Bluebell continue speaking. "Besides, she *hates* your guts. I know you don't like it, so it's better if we stay away from her."

*I've never even told you about that!* Tadpole didn't bother arguing with her. He didn't particularly like getting in conflicts, and even if Bluebell wasn't anything like the dragonmancers, he didn't like feeling terrified about whether Bluebell would still want to talk to him the next day, or would pick on him on purpose. *Well, I think she's not like the dragonmancers, so hopefully not.*

"I know, I know. But this would probably be easier with one other person."

Bluebell was about to argue, but shrugged, nodding. "I guess you're right. But just...maybe not Camellia for both of our sakes." Her gaze was now on the blueberries in Tadpole's arms. "How many of those do you think Cranberry wants us to bring back? She didn't specify."

*Seriously? Can't you at least notice that carrying two blueberries is tiring for me?* He did *not* feel like arguing with Bluebell on that either, so he wasn't going to bring it up.

He hummed quietly. "Probably more than this, but she doesn't expect us to be able to carry a whole bunch at once. I'm barely able to carry two."

She let out a relieved sigh. "Well, hopefully she's okay with two or three. I want to go to bed already."

*Did...did she not hear what I-?* Tadpole decided to not call her out and keep following behind her. He'd get used to it at some point, so even if it was irritating now, he'd get used to it later. *Like with the goat milking, the candle waxing, the alarm bell, and the gardening...I actually liked the gardening, though.*

Even though Tadpole felt that he barely had any right to have an opinion on how the village should develop, he really hoped that a garden of sorts would eventually be on the agenda. Gardening was the only thing really keeping him from losing his temper with the dragonmancers and the other villagers back in Talisman, and he knew for a fact that it was likely one of the few things that would help keep his mind off of things that bugged him in the new village. *Like Camellia.* There was a low chance of him being able to go near it, though. What if he poisoned the supply? It wouldn't be all that surprising if Camellia would scream that at him.

*And now I'm thinking about this as if it's going to happen,* he thought sadly. *I need to stop getting my hopes up like this.*

"Hey, Tadpole? What's wrong?" Bluebell asked, tilting her head.

He blinked at her, confused. "Uh...nothing? Where'd you get that from?"

Bluebell shrugged once more. "You just looked upset, I guess? Or lost in thought." She grimaced at him. "You *do* realise you can tell me what's on your mind, you know? I don't mind having someone else to rant to about Camellia, but it gets a little boring when the conversation is one-sided. You barely ever talk back."

*Because I have no interest in risking my wellbeing by talking behind Camellia's back!* Sure, he was aware that the others did it too, but Camellia especially hated him. If she found out, then... *She'd beat the crap out of me.*

Tadpole groaned. "Maybe I'm just a natural introvert," he muttered, immediately biting his tongue once he realised what he had just said out loud. *Oh moons, she probably hates me and I'm probably going to lose the closest thing I have to a friend now-*

"Oh my *moons*," she whispered in a dramatic voice. Too dramatic, if anyone cared to ask Tadpole. A wildly amused grin was on her face. "You can actually talk back to people!"

He glared at her. "I don't want to talk back to people if I can help it!"

Her gaze wide, she held back a snort of laughter. "Why not? It's fun, especially when you do it to Rowan or Camellia!"

"I don't have a death wish!" Tadpole yelped.

*And not to mention, almost every time I've talked back, I always get punished for it...especially when it was with the dragonmancers.* He didn't particularly enjoy thinking back to his apprentice days, even if it wasn't too long ago when they ended. Sometimes he could still hear Gorge's scathing remarks, Crow's sugarcoated comments full of spite, or the cruel orders Trout gave in his disdainful tone of voice...he tried to avoid thinking about any of them.

He was pulled out of his thoughts by Bluebell poking his forehead, much to his dismay.

"Well, that doesn't explain why you don't do it to me! Or Mallow, Thyme, Cranberry, Grove..."

Tadpole could only stare at her in disbelief. "I don't want anyone to hate me more than they already do!" he cried. The blueberries he was holding were now on the ground.

"Why would anyone hate you? I mean, sure, there's Camellia, but that's just Camellia."

He glared at her, his fists now clenched. "Because I used to be a dragonmancer apprentice, don't you get that?" He could feel his chest burning with anger - he tried to pay it no mind and avoid raising his voice. "I did horrible things because of them. I almost got Grove sacrificed...they should hate me..."

Bluebell didn't say anything for a long while, her gaze softening. "Well, I don't hate you for that."

Tadpole avoided her gaze. "Why?"

"I don't know about the others, but I can't hate you for something you were ordered to do. You don't look like someone who could do something like that on your own, both emotionally and physically," she replied.

*I'm not sure if I should be relieved or offended by that,* he thought wryly.

Bluebell placed her hand on his shoulder. "And it'd feel a bit silly to hate you for that, you know? Leaf was also a dragonmancer apprentice like you, and he's my little brother. But I wouldn't hold that against him."

*Leaf...I wonder how he's doing?* He couldn't help but wonder. The only thing that made being an apprentice bearable was the fact that he wasn't the only apprentice...and that he had someone to share a room with in the first place. It made him feel a bit safer and comfortable, knowing that he wasn't on his lonesome. *Though he probably didn't feel the same way.* Tadpole vividly remembered Leaf purposefully ignoring him whenever he tried to talk to him. *I guess he just didn't like me.*

"I-I guess so," he stammered once he realised Bluebell was awaiting his response. "But are you sure about not judging me for it? You hardly know me."

She gave him a genuine smile. "Then I can get to know you. Problem solved!"

Tadpole couldn't stop himself from smiling back at her. *She really doesn't seem to mind me, despite my past?* He doubted she meant it entirely, considering the other things the dragonmancers had done, but in the moment? He was perfectly happy with knowing that Bluebell didn't seem to mind as much as the others. *Even though she barely knows me...then again, barely anyone in the village knows me.*

Bluebell laughed quietly. "Aw, I didn't know you could smile."

"I-I didn't know I could, either," Tadpole joked, unsure of how to

respond to that. "I...thanks for that."

Her hand slid to his back, now patting it. "Don't mention it. You probably needed it, anyways."

*I'm still not sure if she just doesn't know how to* not *run her mouth, is teasing me, or is trying to be nice in her, uh...unique Bluebell way.* It didn't bother him much, though. And he still wasn't going to debate with her about it - sure, maybe she wasn't like the dragonmancers, but wouldn't she just get mad if he pointed it out? He didn't want to lose the closest thing he had to a friend. *Especially after she had to console me over something that I should've gotten over on my own...*

"So," he began after a moment, breaking the odd silence. "Why did you decide to be nice to me, anyways?" *Surely there has to be some reason?*

She frowned, looking to be in deep thought. "Well, there's no particular reason, I think. But if I had to say something...then I think it's also because you sort of remind me of Leaf. In a good way, of course!"

*Well, I should hope so!* he thought indignantly. *But really? Leaf? She must be joking...how could someone like me remind her of him?* His internal monologue was interrupted by Bluebell poking his forehead once more.

"Tadpole, you alright? You're zoning out again."

*Crap, didn't I respond to her already?* He nodded. "U-uh...yeah. Just thinking."

Bluebell scoffed, an odd smile on her face. "You keep doing that whenever I mention Leaf. Is it some former dragonmancer apprentice secret that I don't know about? Because if there is, you can tell me. I promise that I won't tell anyone! Probably."

Tadpole looked away from her. "He's someone I used to work with and I don't know what happened to him. I-I'm just...wondering what he's up to now, if he isn't here."

"Were you hoping to see him when you came here?" she asked - her

tone sounded genuine yet amused, which already was beginning to tell Tadpole that he was going to hate where the conversation was headed if he didn't end it soon.

"H-he'd probably understand the whole apprentice thing - well, maybe," he muttered. Shoving one of the blueberries into Bluebell's arms, he could already feel his heart pounding as he saw Bluebell stumble slightly. "We should probably head back. It's probably noon by now."

Bluebell didn't say anything, but the barely contained laughter told him everything he needed to know. He groaned inwardly - did Bluebell really have to find something to bug him about, too? *Oh well,* he thought. *At least I know there's one person I can sort of depend on who doesn't hate me.*

# Chapter 22: Rowan

**ROWAN**

Rowan woke up to what she thought was the coldest spring breeze she had felt so far. She scowled at the roof of the shelter before grumpily flopping back on the ground, crossing her arms for warmth. *I cannot* wait *for summer.*

It was already close to late evening, and while Rowan knew she *should've* been helping the others, she couldn't bring herself to get up. Her entire body felt heavy - not the physical kind of sickness, but the 'literally everything is exhausting and if I try to do anything remotely useful I can promise it won't be my best' kind of sickness. She had told Cranberry that she wasn't feeling up to work today, which Cranberry was fine with, but she felt like a deadweight compared to everyone else. *And I really don't think I deserve a break while everyone else works, but I can't say that out loud, can I?*

As another breeze blew into the shelter, Rowan was beginning to wish she had closed the opening with their makeshift door. She didn't think she'd need it, considering it was spring - apparently, she thought wrong. She could've closed it herself, but would rather just wait for Cranberry to hurry up and finish whatever it was she was doing. *I really hope she finishes soon...I'm cold and wouldn't mind cuddling right now.*

She also would've waited for Grove, but from what she could remember, he was out fishing. Cranberry was likely still in the area, so Rowan was willing to bet that she would be done the soonest. Neither of them had really spoken to her since noon, which was around the same time Rowan had taken her nap. Which made Rowan more annoyed than she'd like to admit, but she wasn't going to say it out loud. *They're both actually working, and Cranberry's supposed to be the mayor of the town. Of course they're busy, you idiot.*

A quiet, sort of knocking noise caught Rowan's attention - Rowan drowsily got up and peeked out of the entrance, sighing. *Please be*

*Cranberry or Grove...* In front of her was Thyme, who had a tired expression on his face. *Oh well...at least it isn't Camellia.*

"You alright?"

She shrugged. "Exhausted, but fine." Taking a closer look at his expression, she could've sworn she saw bags. "I should be asking *you* that."

Thyme rolled his eyes. "Don't worry, I plan on sleeping tonight." He briefly glanced over his shoulder, then back at her. "Was I interrupting you, or...?"

Shaking her head, Rowan exhaled quietly. "No, I need to do something to take my mind off of the cold, anyways." *And self-deprecation.* "What is it?"

"Do you mind helping me start the fire? It's not really something I'm the best at, on my own at least."

She frowned, tipping her head slightly. "There isn't anyone else around to help?"

Thyme gave her a wry smile. "Well, Mallow went to fetch Bluebell and Tadpole, and Cranberry said she wanted to speak with Grove in private. Besides us, only Camellia is here at the moment, so I don't think you need to guess why I'm asking you."

Rowan let out a snort of laughter. "Can't argue with that logic. Sure, I can help."

Thyme inched back as Rowan crawled out of the shelter - another gust of wind blasted her in the face, much to her displeasure. Thyme held back a few chuckles, saying nothing. Rowan scowled at him, but didn't think it was worth it to make a retort. She followed him over to where he had started setting up the fire, a bundle of twigs nearby. He sat down, gesturing for Rowan to sit next to him. Camellia, who was sitting across from them, immediately glowered at Rowan.

"I could hear you talking about me, you know," she muttered.

Rowan slowly raised an eyebrow at her, glaring back. "Perhaps you were meant to."

Camellia scowled at Rowan for a moment before turning to Thyme. "Why couldn't you ask me to help? I'm still awake!"

Thyme didn't bother meeting her gaze, grabbing a few twigs. "You're terrifying and would just yell at me the entire time for no reason. No way."

"I only yell at people when they deserve it!" Camellia immediately glanced in Rowan's direction, narrowing her eyes. Rowan looked away, now clutching onto her arms. *Shut up, I know this is all my fault-*

Gently nudging her shoulder, Thyme shook his head slightly. "Don't listen to her." He glared at her. "Can you not start that up again?"

"You can't avoid it forever."

*She's not wrong, but...* "I-I'll talk about it when I'm ready to."

She scoffed. "Sure, and you, Grove, and Cranberry are a thing."

Thyme only stared at her in disbelief, though Rowan could tell he was trying his hardest to avoid laughing at her. "They...they've been officially dating for a few days now, Camellia."

"I-I knew that!" she stammered, her cheeks beginning to flush. She glanced over at Rowan, looking completely disgruntled. "I still doubt you'll ever talk about it, but congratulations to you three. I guess."

"Thank you? That's the nicest thing you've told me today, I'm impressed." Rowan knew that probably wasn't the *smartest* thing to say, but it would do her good to avoid the subject of the lying and Wren around Camellia. *For now, at least...hopefully when the others are here so I don't have to bear the brunt of Camellia's anger.*

Camellia scowled at her once again. "I can be nice to you!"

Thyme stifled a few laughs. "Ah, yes. Camellia, 'nice, amazing

sister.' Definitely the first thing that comes to mind when I think of you."

"You can shut *up*," Camellia snapped, crossing her arms.

"Really striving to prove your point there, aren't you?" he asked, rubbing two small twigs together. Rowan had to keep herself from bursting into chuckles, covering her mouth with her hands. *Camellia would lose it if I started laughing.*

Camellia scanned the ground a bit before letting out a groan of frustration. She scooped up a small bit of dirt, now glowering Thyme intensely. Without hesitating for a single second, she chucked it at him - it instead landed on the pile of firewood, scattering everywhere. Thyme only glanced up at her, slowly raising an eyebrow. Rowan couldn't help but snicker, trying to keep quiet.

"You both are horrible!" Camellia cried. She threw herself onto her back, huffing angrily. "Mallow better get back soon. I can't stand either one of you right now." *Is she implying there are times she can tolerate us, or...? I'm probably just looking too far into it.*

Rowan glanced back over to Thyme - he looked like he wanted to make another joke about Camellia, but didn't feel like getting on her nerves any more. *Honestly, I'm not sure how he has the guts to do that...like sure, snapping back at her is one thing, but making fun of her to her face? I would never hear the end of it if I did something like that...* His attention was back on the firewood, now trying to light a fire.

*How is he doing since everything that happened with Mushroom?* She couldn't help but wonder. Thyme didn't talk much about his brother nowadays, and while Rowan could tell it clearly affected him, it never occurred to her to confront him about it. She tilted her head at him, gingerly bumping his shoulder.

"Hey, Thyme."

He stopped abruptly to look at her. "Yeah?"

*Is he going to appreciate me asking something so personal? Maybe this*

*was a terrible idea.* "Are you doing alright since...you know what?"

He blinked at her, bewildered. "Why do you ask?"

Rowan grimaced, thinking over her words. *What am I supposed to say to that? 'Oh, just curious' doesn't seem like it'd cut it.* "Well, I know you, Cranberry, and Grove try to listen to me after everything that's happened. We're also friends, so I thought...I might try and do the same for you? I know it hasn't been the best couple of days for you, either."

"Huh," he replied after a moment of silence, which made Rowan more anxious than she wanted to admit. "That's nice of you to offer, but really, I'm fine."

She looked over his expression one last time - was he, really? Besides the bags, Rowan had also noted him often keeping watch for dragons more often than what was healthy, forcing himself to keep busy, and sometimes losing sleep...all of which told her he was the exact opposite of fine. Rowan couldn't help but feel a prick of annoyance. Thyme had to know that this wasn't healthy for him to bottle up, didn't he? *Was this how Grove, Cranberry, and Thyme felt whenever they saw I was upset? And just...refused to talk to anyone about it?* Well, that wasn't entirely the best way to word it - she still found herself avoiding the subject with them, especially in the presence of her sisters.

"You don't *sound* fine," Camellia nasally interrupted. Rowan tried to avoid curling her lip at her. *Can't she just mind her own business for once? It's not like she actually cares about anyone here but herself and Mallow...*

Rowan pointedly ignored Camellia and turned back to Thyme. "She isn't wrong, though. You've been acting a lot differently since...Mushroom betrayed us."

Thyme scowled at the firewood, not giving her a glance. "Well, of course I'd be acting differently. That was my *twin brother*, Rowan. But I'm fine."

Crossing her arms, Rowan had to stop herself from groaning. "I

know he was your twin! But the way you've been acting differently isn't healthy."

"If he wants to pull a Rowan, let him," Camellia muttered, waving a hand at Rowan dismissively. "His emotions will spill over at some point, anyways."

"I'm not pulling a-" He stopped himself, then sighed expressively, glancing back at Rowan. "If it really matters to you that much, then no, I'm not really doing the best right now. But I find it easier to just...not talk about or focus on it, you know? I really don't like thinking about what Mushroom did, or what happened in the mountain dragon palace."

Camellia sat back up, giving Thyme and Rowan an odd, searching look. "You keep mentioning this Mushroom guy. What did he even do to you?"

"Horrible person and sibling, reminds me of a certain some-" Rowan began to mutter underneath her breath - Thyme immediately elbowed her shoulder, causing her to yelp. "Fine, I won't finish that!" Slowly turning to Camellia, she sighed. "Just stay out of it. It's none of your business." *And I highly doubt you even care about what's going on with Thyme.*

She rolled her eyes and scoffed. "If it's starting to affect him to the extent you mentioned, then it's also my business when it directly affects the construction of the village. I feel it's perfectly acceptable to ask if I'm going to live here."

Rowan had to stop herself from picking up the nearby dirt and chucking it at her. "Just keep out and shut *up*. Nobody has to answer to your every whim."

"Are you serious? That has nothing to do with what we're talking about!" Camellia stood up, narrowing her eyes. "Don't make this more personal than it needs to be."

"You made it more personal the moment you brought yourself into the conversation!" *Moons, doesn't she ever* think *before she says anything?* "Can't you just leave it alone?"

Camellia's gaze widened, now looking just as confused as she was livid. "You both are literally talking about it *right in front of me*! I'm not sure what you expected me to do."

Now getting up to her feet, Rowan clenched her fists. "For you to shut your mouth for at least one second? Just a thought."

Thyme was also standing up, carefully placing a hand on Rowan's shoulder. "Hey, Rowan? I appreciate you trying to help, but please don't start fighting with Camellia."

"'Don't start fighting with Camellia' he says, as if she already hasn't?" Camellia spat, not paying him a single glance.

Rowan rolled her eyes. "You're the one who kept pushing it."

Camellia kept her venomous glare on Rowan for a few seconds, before turning to Thyme. "Aren't you two friends or something? Shut her up for a moment, will you?"

"I..." He tightened his grip on Rowan's shoulder, leaning towards her a bit. "You know, I'm fine with telling her about the situation with Mushroom if it keeps her from screaming at you more," he mumbled.

Rowan didn't tear her gaze away from Camellia. "Only if you're comfortable with it."

Thyme sucked in his teeth, keeping his hand on her shoulder. Not wanting to listen to Thyme's recounting of the story, Rowan simply focused on Camellia. *I don't get her. Why does she just think it's okay to force people into telling them personal things? I doubt she even knew who Mushroom was!* Camellia's expression was less intense as she listened to Thyme - what was there for her to comment on the situation other than 'oh, I'm sorry to hear that' or 'he really did that to you?' (which Rowan wasn't willing to suspend her disbelief on either). *She'll probably say she's glad that she's not Thyme, or will politely shrug it off if she's feeling nice.*

As Thyme finished up, Camellia slowly turned back to Rowan, her gaze surprisingly lacking the boiling rage her eyes usually had. Her

eyes had a sad look to them, nervous, even. "Did you mean me when you tried comparing Mushroom to a 'certain someone'?"

Rowan immediately felt somewhat guilty. *I did say that, didn't I?* She wasn't sure how she was supposed to respond to that, or if she even wanted to. *I want to say no, but...she knows I'd be lying to her again. And she should know perfectly well by now why I would make that comparison.*

She wasn't going to point it out to Camellia either way, though. Even if she pointed out every similarity between her and Mushroom and why she'd go as far as to make the comparison, Camellia would just scream and yell at her, and find more reasons why Rowan was wrong, like she always did.

*You're still crappy for saying it in the first place, idiot. You'd deserve to get chewed out for being horrible again regardless of how you feel about this situation.*

The distraught look in Camellia's eyes didn't help Rowan feel less guilty, either. She genuinely looked upset about it - which also baffled Rowan to some degree, but she couldn't focus on that at the moment. Despite being one of Rowan's least favourite people to be around, it didn't change the fact that she still caused another one of her siblings to be miserable. *Just another example of how I'm a horrible older sister.*

"*Rowan*," Camellia repeated louder, a slight edge to her voice. "You meant me, didn't you?"

Rowan blinked back a few tears upon hearing Camellia's voice. Brushing Thyme's hand away, Rowan began to storm back over towards the shelter she was sleeping in.

"H-hey, Rowan- wait-" It was Thyme; Rowan ignored him as she crawled back into the shelter. She didn't want to answer. She couldn't answer. *I can't do any of this 'older sister' stuff right.*

# Chapter 23: Brook

**BROOK**

*F-Forest. He's...*

"W-wait, maybe he's just somewhere you haven't checked yet?" Daffodil asked, taking a quick glance at Brook. *Yes, maybe Moth just hasn't found him yet.*

*Or maybe I'm just getting my hopes up only to crush them.*

Moth frowned at her. "Maybe, but...I've been looking for him for a while now." He bit his lip nervously. "I could ask anyone at the dance if they've seen him, if that helps?"

*That's right, Forest was at the dance, wasn't he? So someone probably saw him and might know where he is...*

Brook realised with a jolt that he was talking to her. "Y-yes. That would be great, Moth."

"Alright, ma'am." Moth bounded off in the opposite direction.

Forcing herself to take in a deep breath, Brook could feel her body shaking. *Don't panic, don't panic, don't-* Brook ignored the tears beginning to form in her eyes and turned to Violet and Daffodil. They both looked equally worried now, with Daffodil trembling slightly while Violet couldn't keep her gaze set on anything for too long. Brook couldn't help but feel bad that they were dragged into this. *They're kids. They shouldn't have to get involved in these sorts of problems.*

"Do either of you happen to know which specific tunnel you saw them at?" she asked them, grabbing their attention.

Violet frowned. "I think so? They looked like they were headed towards the exit closest to the ruins...do you think they're headed somewhere specific?"

Her gaze widening, Daffodil nodded. "Or they could be headed to see some*one* specific!"

"Maybe," Violet mumbled underneath her breath. "But why would Forest-" She was immediately cut off by Daffodil elbowing her, angrily gesturing towards Brook. "I-I mean, why would anyone go towards the ruins? Especially at this time."

Brook almost let out a sigh. *I know they're just trying to help.* Even if she felt it was being executed in the worst way possible, at least it wasn't coming from a place of malice. She scanned the cavern one last time for anyone else - it was barren, besides her, Violet, and Daffodil. *That couldn't have been Forest though, right? He wouldn't have been able to leave without someone else...*

Even during the dead of night, there were still at least two Wingwatchers at the exits - or just the major ones at most risk, depending on how many Wingwatchers were available. *And even if something like the dance is going on, there are still enough to guard entrances. Hell, most who do the night shifts don't care that much for those things...* Hopefully Moth just hadn't found Forest yet, and that Daffodil and Violet were just overreacting.

*Except they probably aren't,* her mind whispered. *And Forest's genuinely missing, because you really can't take care of him after all.*

She *despised* it whenever that thought or thoughts of a similar nature popped into her head - the fact that all of these thoughts were now beginning to prove themselves true. *I should've gone to the dance with Forest just to make sure he was alright. Or talk with him prior to the dance...and maybe then he wouldn't have ran off.*

...That was if Forest even ran off in the first place.

*Oh, shut* up*, you stupid brain. I need to focus on finding my son!* She shook the thoughts aside (albeit barely - they were still lingering in the forefront of her mind). Glancing back at Daffodil and Violet, Brook had to steal her nerves.

"Well, we can't stand around here," she breathed. "Both of you, come with me. We'll check out the tunnels near the ruins."

The two stopped bickering amongst themselves and nodded at Brook. Without waiting, Brook had already begun to head off in the direction of the ruins. Her hands twitched nervously as she kept walking. *Maybe Forest came back, if he left...*

*Or maybe someone guarding the entrances stopped whoever it was from leaving?*

She could only hope so. As she kept walking, she couldn't help but glance behind her shoulder to check on Violet and Daffodil. Both were silent, and seemed equally nervous - Daffodil was still clinging onto Violet a little, which Violet didn't seem to mind. Violet kept her eyes on the path ahead, holding onto Daffodil's hand and occasionally entwining their fingers. *Are they a couple now, or...?* Brook shook the thought away. *Not important right now.*

As Brook kept her brisk pace, she soon came to a halt upon spotting Foxglove and Parsley rushing over towards them. Brook held a hand out from behind her, signaling Violet and Daffodil to stop. Foxglove reached them first, almost completely out of breath.

"Comman-" she began, right before Parsley elbowed her, shutting Foxglove up.

"Commander Brook!" Parsley shouted over Foxglove. Foxglove shot Parsley an equally annoyed and bewildered glare, but said nothing.

*Moons, what did Parsley start with Foxglove* now*?* For whatever reason, Parsley never seemed to hold a good opinion of Foxglove - on a good day, it was mostly neutral. Oftentimes Brook would catch Parsley staring at Foxglove, which her gaze was either full of frustration, or another emotion that Brook couldn't quite decipher. Either way, Brook wouldn't be surprised if Parsley had lost her temper while Foxglove ignored her comments. *Perhaps I should've put one of them on guarding duty for tonight instead.*

Brook was pulled out of her own thoughts by the light tugging on her sleeve; she glanced down to see Violet impatiently glancing over at Parsley and Foxglove, then back at Brook. Parsley was already snipping at Foxglove, while the latter simply let out a long, exhausted sigh.

"Thank you, Violet," she muttered, carefully brushing Violet's hand to the side. Brook narrowed her eyes at the two older Wingwatchers. "Grow up, will you? If you have enough time to keep pushing whatever fight you have going this time, then you have enough time to explain why you came rushing to find me."

Parsley, now looking thoroughly embarrassed, tore her gaze away from Foxglove. "Apologies, commander!"

"Sorry, commander," Foxglove said quietly, her expression somewhat peeved. "We came running to find you after Moth told us he couldn't find Forest anywhere. I'm guessing you haven't found him, either?"

Parsley looked like she wanted to say something about Foxglove's comment, but kept her mouth shut for the sake of not wanting to get on Brook's nerves more. *As she should. Maybe I'd find this amusing in some other situation, but definitely not now!*

Brook shook her head. "Unfortunately not. Forest wasn't at the dance, either?"

"No, Forest was at the dance when I got there!" Daffodil butted in, visibly confused. "He said you dropped him off and left."

Violet cast Daffodil an exasperated look. "I think you misunderstood what she meant, Daffodil. She means-"

"I got it, I got it!" Daffodil interrupted, groaning. She glanced back at Foxglove and Parsley. "If it helps, Moth told us that he and Forest came looking for us some time after Violet and I left."

Foxglove hummed, nodding. "So around fifteen minutes or so." She remained quiet for a few more moments, then turned to Brook. "Where were you three headed, again?"

Brook sighed. *Do not start rushing over to the tunnel exit because you find this unnecessary, Brook. Do* not. "Over to the tunnel where Violet and Daffodil last spotted someone heading out. Mind coming with?"

Daffodil let out an offended scoff. "Might as well say you don't trust us to stay safe."

"You're the same age as Forest! I'm *not* going to check for a suspicious individual with either of you without getting any older and experienced Wingwatchers to help," Brook snapped, glowering at her. Not waiting for a response, Brook resumed her pace, bolting past Foxglove and Parsley. "Come on, I'm not wasting more of my time."

Brook didn't bother to look back and see if anyone was following her - but she could hear footsteps from behind her, so it didn't matter all that much. *I gave the order to follow me, anyways. So they* should *be following me regardless.* After making a few more turns based on what Violet and Daffodil had said (Brook quietly promised herself that she'd never take directional advice from either of them ever again), Brook found herself standing in front of the nearest exit to the ruins. *Will they still be here?* She turned around to see the other four still following her - much to her relief, as annoying as it was to admit.

Her gaze was fixated on Foxglove and Parsley. "I want you both to check around this area - also, make sure no one leaves this area or comes in that isn't me if you can."

"Of course, commander," Foxglove replied, already heading off towards the left. She glanced at Parsley over her shoulder for a moment. "I'll check this way, I've been there more often than the right."

Parsley rolled her eyes at Foxglove, but didn't bother arguing - she took off in the opposite direction in a rush. Brook narrowed her eyes at Daffodil and Violet, both of which looked lost.

She pointed at them. "You two, come with me."

"Wait, shouldn't we be going with Foxglove and Parsley?" Violet asked, awkwardly stepping towards the exit. "You said that we're just apprentices."

Brook groaned. Why did they have to make this difficult? "Listen, you both have seen more of this individual than they have, and I know by now that you both are going to follow me anyways. Either come with or stay here."

Daffodil and Violet both shared a look before Daffodil rushed over to the exit, slowing down as she got closer to the outside. Violet followed her, struggling to keep up. Brook held back a sigh as she did the same, picking up her pace as the tunnel ground began to curve into a ramp. A few claw marks that looked fresh (well, as fresh as a week and a few days could be) were more visible the closer she got to the exit, which bugged Brook immensely. *This must be from when Ivy brought that dragon into Valor...I need to make sure I have more competent Wingwatchers over here if this tunnel still looks like this.*

Brook squinted as she took one last step, feeling a cool midnight breeze. Daffodil was hugging the wall, while Violet was scanning the path ahead. *Daffodil should probably scout ahead first,* she thought. *She's been here more than Violet has, at the very least.*

"Daffodil," she spoke up, hoping she didn't sound too loud. Daffodil glanced at her, confused. "I want you to scout ahead - scout far enough where you aren't too close but can easily get back to us in case something pops up. Can you do that for me?"

She grimaced, but nodded. "I-I can try." As she began to head off, she turned back nervously. "You won't suddenly disappear, right? Nothing's going to happen like last time?"

*Is that what she's been so worked up about lately?* Brook couldn't exactly blame her - she was one of the few who didn't get arrested, and had witnessed Violet get taken away from what she had heard. *Forest has probably felt the same way since he saw me get arrested...and yet, I still left him alone.* She knew he had his friends, but as she thought about it, she still couldn't help but feel guilty. *Aster probably had a good point about my parenting.*

"I promise that nothing like the arrests will happen," Brook reassured her, stepping forwards to pat Daffodil's shoulder. She gave the trembling apprentice a wry smile. "And if something does happen, you can yell at me for it. Does that sound alright?"

Daffodil chuckled nervously, nodding. "Y-yeah, actually...that doesn't sound too bad." She glanced at Violet briefly, taking in a deep, shaky inhale. "Be careful, please?"

"Um, *you* be careful," Violet snorted, rolling her eyes slightly. "But I will, don't worry."

Sharing one last glance with each other, Daffodil bounded off in the opposite direction, her hands still trembling a bit. Brook had to stop herself from letting out a sigh - both with relief that Daffodil had actually gone, and anxiousness on what might happen now that Brook sent her off. *If she's smart, then nothing bad should happen,* she told herself, clenching her fists lightly. *But still, she's a teenager.* In the meanwhile, Brook turned her attention to Violet - she had an expression of fear on her face, though it quickly hardened once she realised Brook was watching her.

"I'm sure Daffodil will be alright, as long as she doesn't do anything stupid," Brook murmured, loud enough so Violet could hear.

Violet's expression morphed into an odd mixture of amusement and doubt. "That word choice is incredibly reassuring, commander."

Brook had to hold back a few chuckles. "As it should." She took a few steps closer to Violet, crouching behind a nearby bush. "Daffodil shouldn't take too long anyways. She likely knows her way around this part of the ruins and she doesn't look like she's going to stick around for too long."

Raising an eyebrow, Violet frowned. "I don't think I really need consolation, but thank you." *That...wasn't meant to be considered consolation, but you're welcome, I guess.*

The next few minutes were spent in complete silence - Brook had to strain to hear anything, really. Violet barely stirred, now squatting next to Brook. Her breathing was soft and edging on panicking, but not too audible. Brook raised her line of sight a bit, her eyes squinted. She could somewhat see past the bush now - or at least, through the branches. Daffodil was further along now, from what Brook could tell from her blurry outline. She was stopped for a few moments, then quickly glanced over her shoulder a few times before slowly turning around. *She went further than she needed to, but whatever.*

Brook gently nudged Violet, startling her. "Daffodil's coming back,

get ready."

Violet gave her a look of annoyance, but said nothing. A few more minutes of silence passed - not even the snapping of a twig or crunching of a leaf could be heard. *I don't care how careful she's being, I would be able to hear something by now.* She tapped Violet's shoulder once again.

"Hear anything?"

She shook her head. "Barely. I can't see much, either." A flash of concern spread across her face. "Do you think Daff's alright?"

*I don't think I want to answer that.* "We can go check on her, if that makes you feel any better?" *And myself, admittedly...*

Her only response was a curt nod. Brook carefully stood up, inching around Violet - she poked her head past the bush then glanced to her sides and the sky. Both looked clear, for now. She made a quick gesture to Violet before treading over to the ruins. As she kept going, she could hear Violet's footsteps from behind her. *Good to know she saw my signal.* Before long, Brook was facing Daffodil, who was nervously biting her lip. Daffodil perked up almost immediately upon overhearing them.

Brook spoke up before Daffodil could get a word in. "Did you forget to signal back to us?"

Daffodil took another glance around the ruins before turning back, grimacing. "*Almost* forgot is not forgetting. Also, I got distracted. So can you really blame me?"

"I certainly could, but now's not the time nor place to discuss it or get into the specifics," Brook said dismissively, waving a hand at her. She raised an eyebrow at her. "So what happened?"

She gave a noncommittal shrug. "I think I saw a fire deeper in the forest?"

"A *fire*?" Brook had to force herself mid-sentence to keep her voice down. *That should've been the first thing to tell me, I-*

"Wait, don't get mad!" she cried, or at least as much as she could shout without being too loud. "Like, campfire sort of fire. It didn't look all that serious so I didn't think to tell you that immediately. It was just *distracting*."

Brook desperately wanted to facepalm, but she didn't want to potentially embarrass Daffodil, nor did she want to act even more unprofessional in front of the apprentices than she already had. *I'm their commander* and *Valor's lord, I need to try and remain somewhat professional.* Instead, Brook just let out a deep yet quiet sigh.

Violet frowned at Daffodil for a split second, then at Brook. "...Maybe whoever's there might've seen whoever it was that left Valor? There's a good chance of that, right?"

Daffodil's expression shifted to a wide grin, nodding. "Yeah! Or maybe it could be whoever that was?" She glanced at Brook, crossing her arms. "We need to go check it out!"

"Hngh...I suppose so," Brook relented, begrudgingly. *If it means we might find Forest sooner, then we need to do it.* Even though she was partially sure whoever had left Valor would've been more careful than to let anyone hear them. "It's probably just Azalea and the other banished, though. So don't get your hopes up."

Violet and Daffodil flashed each other a triumphant look before taking off, with Daffodil in the lead. Brook felt like *screaming. Brook, don't lose your patience. You are a mother to a little arsonist in the making who manages to make the most terrifying meals. You can handle these two.* She instead followed behind them, looking over her shoulder every so often. *If that isn't Azalea or any of the other banished, then it's probably whoever left. But why would they leave Valor when they could just sleep in their cave?*

*Unless it's that messenger who left,* she thought, which changed things a fair bit. If it was him, then why'd he wait until now to leave? Surely the Invincible Lord would want his news sooner rather than later. *Well, whatever. If it is him, then I can question him about it.*

Before long, Brook found herself coming to a sudden halt - Violet had stopped too, while Daffodil kept going. *Is she not going to-?*

Daffodil paused for a brief moment, her face lighting up as she resumed her pace, trampling a few bushes in the process. Violet let out a quiet exhale before taking off after her. *Well, it's either Forest, or someone they know. I've never met anyone that excited to see Azalea.* Brook held in her breath and followed their footsteps, eventually entering a small clearing. *Hopefully it's Forest. I don't want to stress over this even longer, and I'll know he's safe sooner.* In the middle was the fire Daffodil had pointed out - closer to the edges of it was a few travelling supplies stuffed into a satchel. *Travellers, then.*

Brook couldn't help but feel disappointed and even more anxious. *If he isn't here, then where did he go? Moth said he wasn't at the dance, and Foxglove and Parsley confirmed it, too...* She could feel the pit in her stomach growing as she thought more about it. *In that case, I'll just hope it's the messenger.*

She really shouldn't have gotten her hopes up for that alternative, either - the only person in the clearing besides herself, Daffodil, and Violet was a boy who looked around their age, cleaning off the sword in his lap. He had a few scars on his arms and neck, but overall looked fairly healthy. Brook squinted her eyes at him - wasn't he that same kid who set off Heath's paranoia? *Has to be. That kid was extremely fit for his age, and didn't look like he was from Valor.* He perked up the moment he saw them.

"Leaf!" Daffodil cried, delighted. She ran over to him, much to Brook's dismay.

Leaf looked somewhat alarmed by her shout, but greeted her with an awkward smile. "I forgot how close we were to Valor. Hey, Daffodil and uh..." He glanced over at Violet and Brook.

Violet rolled her eyes at him, scoffing. "You should know my name by now, Leaf."

"I know, I know! Violet and umm...Brook, right?" He scratched the back of his head, groaning quietly. "Sorry, it's been a rough day."

Daffodil frowned at him. "What do you mean?"

Brook took another step, raising an eyebrow at him. "Casual talk

can wait for another day, we can't stay too long. Why are you here?" Daffodil flashed a glare at Brook, but quickly turned away once she seemed to realise Brook had noticed.

"Oh, well...Ivy wanted to see if the golden dragon we came across here came back, so we're staying here in the meanwhile," he explained with a shrug. "She's off with Wren and Sky right now, though."

"She's here-?" Daffodil began, before cutting herself off - she looked like she was trying not to grin even more at the mention of Ivy. "With Wren and Sky, you said?"

Violet had a similar expression on her face - though Brook could detect a hint of nervousness. "Well, of course she'd be with them. It's Ivy, what do you expect?"

*Wren's that girl who brought the dragon into Valor, right?* She couldn't remember that much from Ivy's long winded explanation - far too often, Ivy would lose track of what she was talking about and start rambling about something else. *Then again, she was excited. From what I've seen, she's always incredibly delighted to discuss anything dragons or up on the surface.* If Brook was being honest with herself, the main reasons she remembered Wren was because of the whole incident with the dragon, and how often Ivy would excitedly mention Wren. *Bit different from when I was younger - a lot different, actually...what kind of teenager befriends a* dragon *of all creatures? Either way, I think I get that excitement.*

Leaf nodded. "Yeah. Wren and Sky wanted to help Ivy look around one last time before we call it a night, but I'm pretty sure Wren just wanted to cheer Ivy up." Glancing around quickly, his gaze widened slightly. "Do *not* tell Wren I said that, by the way."

"Tell Wren that you like teasing her behind her back, got it," Daffodil snorted, earning a punch on the arm from Leaf. She shared a brief look with Brook before shrugging. "We probably aren't going to stay long enough to catch up with them, though."

Brook held back another groan and gave the two of them a curt nod. "Exactly. Leaf, you haven't seen anyone other than them out

here, right? I'd say besides Azalea and the other banished too, but they're probably keeping their distance from you four regardless."

He slowly shook his head, concern beginning to creep into his expression. "No...why do you ask? Did something happen in Valor?"

Daffodil jumped in before Brook could respond, which mildly relieved Brook in the sense that she probably would've snapped at him for not noticing the obvious if no one else had said something. "Forest went missing! We can't find him anywhere, and we're really worried."

"I...don't really know who that is," he hesitantly admitted. "I only remember him vaguely from the arrests, so I'm probably not that much help. But I didn't see anyone come near this area, if that helps at all?"

Smiling at him, Daffodil took his hands and nodded - he seemed shocked by the sudden gesture, but didn't say anything. "It does help a bit, actually. Thank you!"

*Not the most helpful information, but at this rate, it's* something... "Indeed. We'll be taking our leave now, thank you for this." Leaf just nodded again, looking unsure of what to say.

"Bye, Leaf!" Daffodil called, waving a hand at him as she began to bound off in the direction she had come. "Make sure to tell Ivy that Violet and I miss her, okay?"

"I'll be sure to do that," he replied, waving back. He glanced back at Brook. "You're welcome. Hope you guys find him. I can try asking Wren, Ivy, and Sky if they saw him - we aren't going to stick around long, but we can report back to you if we find him."

Brook gave him a quick nod. "That would be great, thank you again." As she turned around to leave, she spotted Violet hesitantly opening and closing her mouth. "Violet? We're leaving."

"Just one second," Violet answered, her voice noticeably shakier than before. She grimaced at Leaf. "If you could, can you tell Ivy I'm sorry for acting so immature about her leaving Valor? I just...don't

want her to think-"

"She probably doesn't. But I can tell her that too, I guess." He now seemed vaguely annoyed, Brook guessed. *Probably because we've overstayed our welcome. And probably because of all the things we've been asking him.*

Violet smiled briefly before wiping it off of her face. "T-thank you, it means a lot."

Before Brook could repeat her order to leave, Violet turned around and ran to catch up with Daffodil. *I'm still annoyed by how much time this took up...we still haven't found Forest, despite that,* she thought, unable to help but feel somewhat bitter. *But Violet probably needed that.* Brook did one last check of the surrounding area for dragons or anyone else before taking off after Daffodil and Violet. She sighed, trying to ignore the tears that began to well up in her eyes again. *If he wasn't spotted by Leaf, or anyone else in this area...then where did he go?*

*We have to find him soon. We need to.*

...

A few days had passed since Forest's disappearance. Brook had been sick with worry - like Moth had suspected, Forest wasn't anywhere in Valor, according to those she sent to go check from within the city. She had sent patrols to the surface along with the search parties in the city, but to no avail. *He's gone. No one's seen him, he might be dead-* She tried to keep the thought out of her head, but it kept coming *back*.

*He's disappeared.*

*No one can find him.*

*He might be dead by now, especially if he went to the surface.*

*This is all my fault.*

Brook hadn't been able to think about anything else. Her *son* was gone. How could she call herself the lord of Valor when she couldn't

keep the most important person to her alive? *I shouldn't be the lord at all. If I couldn't protect someone as a mother, then I shouldn't be trusted with the lives of Valor.*

She was sitting at her desk, head buried in her arms. Brook had been hoping that doing paperwork would help distract her while she waited for news, but it only proved the opposite. *If only it did work. Maybe I'd have my paperwork done on time if that was the case.* She hadn't moved much from her desk, and could barely bring herself to get up to eat, even.

*People are going to notice something is up soon, though.* Brook had made sure that the Wingwatchers going out on the patrols were the only ones who knew that Forest was missing, but with Brook hardly going out, she was fairly certain most people were suspecting something happened. *And when they find out, people are going to get mad at me for hiding this or for being a horrible mother. Or they'll panic, and then fear about what might've happened will spread in the town, which could lead to them beginning to regret letting me be their lord-*

A knock on the door momentarily took Brook's attention. *Thank the moons, a distraction.* She got up from her chair and opened the door. *Hopefully it's Aster, or someone else who was also on that patrol.* Brook had sent her out on another aboveground search patrol, though Brook didn't particularly want to. She hated the feeling of being alone in her cave, and not having any sort of company. *Even if it's...Aster when she's still in a mood with me.*

Much to Brook's dismay and slight worry, it was Lark. Her hair was messy and slightly tangled (odd - Lark never went anywhere until she did her hair), and she had on her work clothes. A medium sized satchel sat on her hip, and from what Brook could tell, it was packed with various items. *What's she doing here? Last I checked, she was still angry with me for that fight we had...and she still hasn't apologised for pushing it.* It was better than nothing, she supposed.

"Lark? I thought you were...you know, still angry with me."

Lark blinked a few times, then shrugged. "Oh, don't get me wrong, I still am. But I know you haven't been doing all that well, and..." She

shook her head mid-sentence. "I'm not stupid, I know something's up with you. I'm not going to push you to tell me because I'm pretty sure I know what happened by now."

Brook narrowed her eyes at Lark. "You shouldn't push me into telling you things in general. I will tell you certain things when I'm comfortable with it, Lark." Letting out a deep sigh, Brook avoided Lark's conflicted gaze. "I won't say you're wrong, though. I've been trying to keep it out of the public knowledge so people don't panic, but..."

"I feel like hiding it won't help much either, but...I can understand that," Lark admitted, her voice quiet. "But what are you going to do if the patrols can't find him? I've seen you the past few days - you've checked everywhere in Valor, and most areas nearby it on the aboveground. They can't keep searching forever."

*And they won't keep searching if I keep sending patrols out for it either,* Brook realised with a jolt. Somehow that realisation just made everything even more miserable - she was going to have to give up on her son since no one could find him? She felt sick at the thought, but it made sense. The Wingwatchers she'd been sending on the patrols must've been getting tired of it, and probably were hoping Brook would just give up and assume he died already. *I...I can't give up on him. He's the only family I have, and Petal wanted me to carry on her wish...*

*No. I am* not *giving up on Forest.*

Inhaling sharply, Brook scowled. "Well, then what do you propose we do? I have to stay here and rule over Valor, and I doubt you'd actually get a chance to go searching for him out on the surface when there's so much for you to do as well."

Throwing her hands up, Lark groaned. "I never said that we could go looking for ourselves! But that isn't a *bad* idea, while we're discussing it."

She tilted her head slightly. "Elaborate on that idea. Even if it's impossible, I still want to hear what you had in mind."

"Hrmm...well, if you insist." Lark began curling a strand of her hair around her finger, frowning. "It's not really much of a plan, though. I was only thinking you could have someone else take over for you in the meanwhile. That way you could still go looking for him without tiring out the other Wingwatchers."

Her gaze slowly widening, Brook had to think for a moment. That *could* work, couldn't it? Finding someone to take over for a bit that *wasn't* Lark seemed difficult, though. "Who would you suggest for that, then? You weren't very subtle about wanting to help."

Lark's cheeks flushed. "I-I mean, if you want me to take over for you again, I can, but-" she paused mid-sentence to catch her breath. "-I really do want to help you as well, Brook. I know you've been letting me come into your office and such, and I want to return the favour."

*Return the favour?* Brook couldn't help but feel her own cheeks heat up at Lark's words. *Even when she's still angry at me, she wants to help me? And that aside, she's always thought it was too dangerous to leave Valor...*

"No, no, it's just-" Brook stopped to think over her words. "I just didn't think you'd risk your life to help me, considering...well, I know you don't like going aboveground, for one."

With a shaky sigh, Lark nodded. "I don't, but...I want to be there for you. And I'm just as worried about Forest, you know - from one mother to another."

Unable to stop herself from smiling, Brook exhaled softly. "Thank you, Lark." She was silent for a few moments. "I don't think it'd be safe if just us went, though. I can gather a few Wingwatchers to come with - ones that would be fine with going, of course." *I don't think it'll be too dangerous for them, and I know that they'd...* definitely *be willing...* she thought. *Hopefully Daffodil's parents and Violet's dads don't mind all that much. Just for extra measure, maybe Foxglove and Parsley since they were first alerted of the situation.*

Lark hummed quietly, giving Brook another curt nod. "That'd be great, actually. I can go ask around and see if anyone with proper

experience could help out while we're gone, if that helps?"

"Yes! Go do that - I'll go ahead and arrange a meeting with the other Wingwatchers. Hopefully a decent amount can come on such a short notice," she replied, already glancing over her shoulder - her paperwork was still resting on the desk, though some of it had fallen to the ground. "As a bonus, I get to put off my paperwork even longer."

"I'm not so sure if that's a good thing," Lark chuckled wryly, nudging Brook's shoulder. "But you go ahead and do that. I'll try to find someone as soon as I can."

As Lark took off, Brook scratched the back of her neck lightly as she followed her. *Moons, I hope this plan works...every moment we spend wasting our time, Forest could be dead.* Brook had to stop herself from glancing over in the direction of Forest's room as she passed it - she couldn't help but feel a wave of guilt for not doing more whenever she passed his room. Brook stepped in front of Lark as they got closer to the cave's exit.

"Allow me," Brook said, pulling the door open. Lark just scoffed, though there was a noticeable smirk on her face. She stopped suddenly as she walked out - Brook craned her neck to see Foxglove at the door's entrance, giving Brook and Lark an odd look.

She raised an eyebrow slowly. "...Was I interrupting you two?"

Brook shook her head, trying to ignore the heat rushing to her face. "No, we were just leaving!" She caught her breath, sighing. "Did you need something, Foxglove?"

Foxglove grimaced. "Well, two somethings, technically?"

"Go on. We're on a bit of a tight schedule right now, so make it quick, please?" Brook gestured for Lark to head out, then followed her, shutting the door as she left. Lark gave Brook one last wave before heading off in a different direction. "You can tell me as we get the Wingwatchers guarding the exits. I'm calling a Wingwatcher meeting now."

Nodding, Foxglove sped up a bit to match Brook's pace. "O-okay, then. So, um...Brook, you know how you sent Aster on one of those patrols to find your son?"

*Oh. I don't think I like where this is going.* "What...happened to Aster?"

Foxglove frowned. "She isn't dead, as far as we know? But we couldn't find her upon returning to Valor. I'm really concerned - did she say anything about wanting to leave Valor soon?"

Hesitantly, Brook shrugged. "She hasn't, to my knowledge. She's been refusing to speak to me since I, uh...ahem." Did Foxglove even know what happened with the messenger? *Do any of the other Wingwatchers, for that matter?* "Might've yelled at the messenger from the Indestructible City. And added in some colourful language of my own."

"Commander, no offense but you need to get a hold of your temper if *that's* your reaction to a messenger," Foxglove muttered, arching an eyebrow.

Brook glared at her. "You don't even know what it was about," she snapped. "So perhaps refrain from making those comments. I've heard enough of them from Lark." *I do* not *want to get another 'Brook, if you keep acting like this, you'll end up like Heath!' comment. I will* scream *at the next person to imply that.*

Foxglove looked slightly startled, but quickly regained her composure. "Alright, I won't talk about that any more." Foxglove looked like she wanted to add a few snide comments underneath her breath as well, but seemed to think better of it. *She knows by now that I'm not going to tolerate it.* "Anyways, it seems like she might've been angered by that specifically and took off because of it, if that's the only thing we have to go off of."

Narrowing her eyes, Brook huffed quietly at the suggestion. "I wasn't even yelling at her - if she was angry about what happened sure, I suppose that would get on her nerves. But to the point of leaving? She's literally only known him for less than a day, as far as I'm concerned."

"Well, actually-" Foxglove stopped herself, thinking over her words. "I don't think I'll say it outright, because I really don't want to doubt her, but all I'm going to say is that it's suspicious."

*Suspicious? I can certainly see that.* Brook found the whole situation with Aster rather odd, if she was being honest. Why did Aster have to push herself onto staying with Brook, only to disappear so soon? *It doesn't sound like she was taken by anything - more like she left on her own accord.*

*I'll have to keep an eye out for her when we leave.*

Brook nodded lightly. "I agree with you to some extent, I'll leave it at that." Her gaze flickering past the various caves along the tunnel, she frowned as she turned back to Foxglove. *Did most of the Wingwatchers decide to spend their time aboveground today? I didn't send that many up there today...* "What was the other thing you needed to tell me?"

"It's not as noteworthy as the thing with Aster if you ask me, but Holly told me I should probably let you know that Heath's been acting up again," Foxglove muttered, kicking up some dust.

She couldn't help but feel an amused grin tug at her face. "You say this as if he's a child." Foxglove only stared at Brook for a long, disbelieving moment in reply, her eyebrow raised. "You *know* what I meant. But what was he doing now?"

Foxglove gave her a nonchalant shrug. "Was fussing over being treated like a regular civilian this time, I think? I don't know, and frankly don't care enough to know. He makes my patience wear thin very quickly, commander." She gave a short wave to a few passerby as she took a deep breath. "You decide what you're going to do with him yet, or have you just not gotten the chance?"

"Haven't gotten the chance, unfortunately," Brook groaned. "It's not even that I'm procrastinating, but there's so much to fix because of him that dealing with that bastard isn't my top priority. I don't really want to immediately resort to banishing him, though - I really don't want to hurt Lark or Ivy."

"You're being a lot nicer on him than I'd thought you'd be," Foxglove commented, tilting her head. "But that makes sense. I don't want to see Ivy hurt, either."

Brook just exhaled deeply, rubbing her temple. "Well, unlike some people, I wouldn't resort to execution. That'd just make me feel sick and like I'm no better than him." *And I've heard...enough comparisons to last me a lifetime.* "For the time being, I'm just going to observe him in the meanwhile until I can get around to handling it. We'll see how he acts, but I have the feeling I might have to clean out the jails for him sometime in the future."

Foxglove didn't reply to that, much to Brook's relief. *I'm sure that it'll work for the time being, all things considered.* She wasn't all too concerned with that, at the moment - as she drew closer to the Wingwatchers at the nearest entrance, she held in her breath. *Don't worry Forest. I'm coming for you.*

# Chapter 24: Wren

**WREN**

"I really wish we could've helped them more, though," Ivy sighed, crossing her arms. They had finally left the ruins near Valor, despite Ivy not particularly wanting to ever since Leaf had told them about Forest - not to mention, there was still no sign of the golden dragon.

Leaf gave her a sympathetic look. "I know, I do too. But you know we can't stay too long."

Ivy pouted slightly. "You don't have to remind me!" She cast another look over in Valor's direction. "I hope Forest's okay. I can't imagine how worried Commander Brook must be."

*I hope he's alright too, if not for both of their sakes, then Brook's...* Wren could probably imagine Brook's worry. She had been worried sick when Sky had been dragon-napped, so she could understand why Brook would get so anxious about it. *Well, if we find him, we can take him back to Valor without much issue. I hope so, anyways...*

"I get that," Wren spoke up, catching Ivy's attention. "But Leaf *is* right - we do need to leave soon. Make sure you have everything, alright?"

Ivy's shoulders slumped. "Alright." *Is she just upset about Forest disappearing?* Wren wanted to think so, but that probably wasn't it. *It's weird that it's harder to tell what Ivy's upset about, but not what she's excited about.* "Where are we headed, then? We couldn't find the golden dragon, and we couldn't find Forest, either..."

*Oh.* So she was still upset over the whole ordeal with the golden dragon. *Of course she'd be, though...that's one of the main reasons she left Valor to travel with us.* Wren couldn't help but feel bad - it was something that Ivy had constantly talked about, and seemed to excite her the most outside of her dragonspeak lessons with Wren. *I can try talking to her about it later.*

"Probably near the Indestructible City," Wren begrudgingly admitted. "We're going to need more supplies soon. I didn't get any the last time I went there, and it's not just me and Sky any more."

Tilting her head slightly, Ivy frowned at Wren. "Why that tone of voice?"

Wren was about to answer, but changed her mind upon seeing Ivy's somewhat uninterested expression. "I can explain on the way there, if you want."

Before Ivy could respond, Leaf spoke up first. "Wait, why can't we just get supplies in Valor? We're closer to it than, say, the Indestructible City."

"Probably because of the whole situation going on with Forest," Ivy answered, much to Wren's mild annoyance. *I'm pretty sure he was asking me, Ivy.* Wren wasn't going to deny that it was also a good reason, though. "It's been a few days by now, so I wouldn't be shocked if there were some people becoming overly concerned. I mean, it's no dragon, but..." she trailed off, looking away.

Wren let out a disgruntled huff. "That's probably a better reason than mine. But if you want to know, personally I just don't want to stick around this area for too long. And I really don't want to figure out trading in an entirely new place while something that serious is going on."

Leaf was quiet for a moment, then shrugged. "I suppose so."

*I mean, we could probably try it, but...I wouldn't know where to go, who to go to, and it doesn't help that people are probably panicking by now.* If they came by Valor again, then Wren would probably be more willing to make an attempt if there wasn't another sort of issue going on in Valor. *I'd probably have to ask Ivy for help, either way...and even though I'm sure she'd help me, no questions asked...* Wren looked over Ivy's annoyed and disappointed expression one more time. *I don't think she really wants to spend more time here, either.*

"Well, on the bright side, it *is* a bit closer to that village Rowan and

her friends are building," Wren remarked, shrugging. She gently nudged Ivy's shoulder, hoping she was listening. *Maybe checking on how that's going might cheer her up?* "It's been a short while, and I have to admit that I'm curious to see how far they've gotten."

*Probably not too far, all things considered,* Wren had to remind herself. *As far as I know, it's only those four working on it. And I have no clue if they even planned on too many specifics for the time being.* But...Wren was going to try and be a bit more positive about it - partially for Ivy's sake, but also for her own.

Ivy smiled slightly at her. "Oh yeah! They are making that village, aren't they?" Wren couldn't stop herself from smiling back, just for a bit. *Hopefully that's something for her to look forwards to besides the golden dragon.* "I can't *wait* for it to be finished. Maybe that'll be one of my first big steps for dragon-human communications? If we can get anyone to move there, but..."

"I thought your first was going to be finding the dragon?" Leaf asked, raising an eyebrow. *Why'd he have to bring that back up when she was starting to feel a little better?*

She shook her head sadly. "I might just have to change it to being one of the first. But seeing the new village in process might be just as exciting."

Lightly nudging her shoulder again, Wren tried to catch her attention once again. "Well, why don't you focus on that in the meanwhile? It might help lift your mood."

Ivy sighed. "I guess so."

*...Or it might not.* Wren decided that she wouldn't dwell too much on that, though. Regardless of Ivy's mood, they still had to move on from the ruins. *We can look in a different place after getting supplies and maybe visiting Rowan, anyways.* After a brief pause of awkward silence, Wren's gaze flickered between Leaf and Ivy.

"We should go," she coughed, grabbing their attention. Turning to Sky, she gently patted his talons. "Are you ready to go, Sky?"

Sky nodded. "Yep!" He crouched down a little for Wren - making sure her satchel and sword were straddled to her back, she climbed onto his back and then his neck.

Leaf gestured for Ivy to go ahead. "You go first. You'll be waiting for me to get on anyways."

She was about to argue, but thought better of it, rushing over to where Wren sat. Ivy struggled, however - though she had improved since their first flight together, she still was getting used to it, Wren supposed. *And she isn't in the best of moods right now - let alone these past few days...so I guess I should cut her some slack.* As Ivy continued to struggle, Wren hesitantly offered her hand to her, ignoring the slight rush of heat running to her cheeks. Much to Wren's surprise, Ivy took it, awkwardly sitting behind Wren.

"You didn't have to do that, you know," she mumbled, avoiding Wren's gaze. *Wait, should I not have...?*

Wren had to stop herself from flinching a little. "I just thought that..."

Her eyes widening, Ivy shook her head. "Oh! I didn't mean it like that, I just..." She let out a soft exhale. "Never mind. Thank you anyways, Wren."

Not wanting to answer, Wren just shifted her gaze over to Leaf, who was now hesitantly making his way onto Sky's back. *I know she's not in the best of moods, but...* Wren still couldn't help but feel at least a smidge annoyed and hurt, despite it not being Ivy's intention to do so. She tried to shrug off the feelings, inhaling sharply. *I don't have the time to be focusing on that, anyways.*

Leaf gave the two an odd look upon sitting down. "Everything's okay between you guys, or...?"

"Just a misunderstanding, that's all," Ivy answered before Wren could reply. She glanced back in Wren's direction. "Could we please get going now? I really don't want to stay here much longer."

*Probably because of everything going on in Valor, the golden dragon,*

*and...well, whatever happened in the ruins while Ivy was by herself,* Wren guessed. Ivy still hadn't wanted to talk about what had occurred during their first night at the ruins - the few attempts Wren, Leaf, and Sky had made to discuss it with her immediately were shut down as politely and quickly as they could be. And even after Wren had assured her that she wasn't mad about the sword and Leaf trying his best to comfort her, Ivy still seemed miserable.

Which was mildly annoying, to Wren at least. And in turn, somewhat confusing as to why. *I mean, sure, it is annoying that she isn't willing to open up to any of us about this, but it* is *her business.* Was it because of how noticeable Ivy's mood was? Or how she just seemed more demotivated than Wren had ever seen her? *Maybe, but I'm not going to think about that right now, either.*

Wren nodded. "Yeah. We can."

...

It had been a day or so since they had left the ruins. They were still travelling, still flying - though Wren was hoping to switch to foot before too long. The Indestructible City wasn't too far away from them now, and Wren really didn't want to risk it, flying too close. She narrowed her gaze from where she was sitting - from the upper half of Sky's neck, she could somewhat make out the shape of the city in the distance, armed with weapons that could potentially take out a dragon. *Absolutely not taking any chances with that. Nope.*

Casting a look over her shoulder, she caught a glimpse of Leaf clinging onto both a spike on Sky's back and partially onto Ivy, who didn't seem to entirely mind. She frowned slightly - at least he was beginning to handle it better, in his own way, but... *I might have to try and convince him to take a few practice flights with Sky, if they're both in the mood for it. It really isn't fun watching him get terrified while flying and then getting sick from it afterwards.*

Not much had improved with Ivy since then - she still wasn't exactly in a better mood than when they left, though she seemed a bit more talkative. *Maybe she's feeling better, but...considering how closed up she got about it...I'm half convinced she's just trying to push it to the side.* Wren still didn't want to press it, though - while it

bothered her, sure, it didn't seem like much better progress would be made if Wren just tried and failed to strike up another conversation about it instead. *And besides, she doesn't particularly press me to share my issues.*

She turned back towards Sky and lightly patted his head. "I think we should land somewhere around here. I'd rather walk the rest of the way to our valley, just to be safe."

He seemed to think over her words for a brief moment. "You sure? I don't think they'll notice us from this direction, and it's still a really far walk. Especially for Leaf and Ivy, I think."

Wren shot another glance at Ivy, then grimaced. *Mostly just Ivy, though. Leaf's actually done some travelling prior to joining us.* She turned back to him, nodding. "Yeah. If they get tired, we can rest along the way."

"Hmmm, that makes sense. I'll land somewhere around here, then!"

As Sky began to descend, Wren was about to remind Ivy and Leaf that they were landing - but quickly closed her mouth once she saw Ivy give her a curt nod, while also reassuring Leaf as they landed (which Leaf didn't seem to enjoy much, but also appreciated). Nodding back, Wren glanced back up at the sky. *Well, fear of heights or not, they've at least gotten used to this...* It was something of a relief, for Wren. She was still getting accustomed to constantly being around two other humans (well, her brother and mostly complete stranger turned friend, so she supposed it wasn't too disorienting), and she wasn't entirely sure if travelling with other humans would be the best idea, what with how she and Sky travelled. *Well, regardless, it's going better than how I thought it would.*

Before long, they were on the ground. Wren quickly hopped off, glancing up at Sky's back - Leaf stumbled off first, with Ivy right behind him. He walked over to Wren, groaning.

"You think you'll be alright, or...?" Wren asked, helping him gain his bearings.

Leaf let out a half-amused, half-pained grunt. "No. But if you're

asking if I think my nausea going to get worse, I don't think so, if I take it easy."

Ivy frowned once she got to his side. "Well, if you change your mind, just tell us." Turning to Wren, she tilted her head slightly. "Are we stopping here?"

Shaking her head, Wren began heading forwards, gesturing for them to follow. "No, we're walking the rest of the way. Come on!"

Ivy opened her mouth to reply, likely to protest, but didn't say anything. She just gave Leaf a pitiful look before taking his hand, following Wren. Leaf didn't bother with trying to stop her, just sighing as he picked up his pace. *Should I have waited a bit longer before telling Sky to land? Leaf seemed pretty out of it...*

*Probably not. If we didn't stop soon, Leaf might've thrown up on some*one *instead.* There was still some lingering doubt in Wren's mind, but she tried to avoid thinking on it more. *And besides, I think Leaf's smart enough to avoid doing that.*

...

Soon they had reached the valley, after another day or two of walking. The sun was already beginning to set, much to Wren's relief. *I won't immediately have to go.* They were now resting, exhausted. Wren was especially exhausted, but she wasn't about to say it out loud. She looked over her shoulder; Ivy was barely standing up, leaning onto Leaf - Leaf seemed equally as tired, though he tried to keep himself from falling over for Ivy's sake. Sky didn't seem as tired as the rest of them, but it was still noticeable. Glancing around one last time, Wren sighed inwardly. *Frankly, even if we hadn't reached the valley at this point...I still would've had us stop at this point.*

Flopping down onto the grass, she gave them a vague gesture to the ground. "I'm exhausted, you guys are also exhausted, so we're staying here until I'm finished trading with the Indestructible City. Any objections?"

"Thank the *moons*," Leaf breathed before sitting down next to her.

"Any further and I would've collapsed."

Sky also sat down next to them, resting his head on his arms. "You aren't going to immediately go there, are you?"

Wren shook her head. "No. I'm too tired for that, and it's getting late." She glanced over towards Ivy, who seemed mildly relieved that she didn't have to help prop Leaf up for the time being. "Ivy, you also look exhausted."

She gave Wren a short, weary nod. "I know. I'm not used to walking those long distances...let alone in the mountains." Sitting down next to them, Ivy closed her eyes for a long moment. "My feet hurt."

Leaf gave Ivy a sympathetic glance. "Mine do too. You'll probably get more used to it if you're still set on travelling after we've found the dragon."

"I suppose so, but...they still *really* hurt," Ivy groaned. She stretched her legs and feet, only to pull her left foot back, rubbing it gently. "Oww."

"Sorry about that, Ivy," Wren said after a brief moment of silence. "If it helps, my feet also sort of hurt. But in any case, I would've preferred to have Sky fly us here, but..."

Ivy's gaze widened slightly. "-The Indestructible City?" Simply nodding, Wren didn't answer. "That's understandable. Even from a distance, it looked terrifying...safe for some, probably, but still scary."

*Well, I'd call it more terrible looking, but sure,* Wren agreed. *I bet it's worse on the inside than the outside, though. Especially with how it seems to treat children...*

Shrugging, Leaf ripped a bit of grass from the dirt. "Not entirely sure on how bad it is, but...from what I've heard from Grove, it's probably not much better on the inside."

"Like Talisman," Wren added without thinking.

Ivy frowned, now resting her chin on her hand. "How come almost

every human village I know about is awful?" *Because most people* are *awful, Ivy.* Wren managed to stop herself from saying it out loud, which she felt was impressive - especially when she felt that fact was true as well.

The few minutes of silence also seemed to tell Wren that it was probably for the best if she didn't say anything. *And besides, Ivy's probably still upset from a few days ago, and this didn't put her in the best of moods...* Which was confusing to Wren, as she wouldn't typically think of something like *that* when it came to stopping herself from saying anything, really. *Well, whatever. It's not the biggest concern, anyways.*

Sky gently nudged Ivy, grabbing her attention. "Hey, at least the village we're helping out with won't be like that, right?"

She nodded, a smile seeming to tug on her lips. "Yeah, you're right about that. I really hope that I can help them in some way while we're there for a bit. I mean, it's only the four of them working on the village, after all." *I know this is Ivy and she probably just wants to help them, but...this feels like it's also charged by something else.*

"Hopefully we won't take too long getting there," Leaf mumbled, yawning a little.

Wren gave him a weak nod of agreement, yawning as well. "I hope so as well." She glanced back up at the darkening sky, spotting a few stars. "We can sleep for now. We'll figure things out with the trading in the morning."

Leaf placed his sheathed sword on the ground next to him. "Good idea. I think we all need sleep, anyways." His gaze drifted to the sky, starting to lay down. "The stars are coming out now. I think I'm going to go to sleep soon."

Ivy looked vaguely disappointed. "You don't want to look at the stars for a bit? They're so pretty!"

For a moment it seemed like Leaf was about to decline, but sighed and smiled, sitting back up a bit. "I suppose I can stay up for a little longer."

Beaming, Ivy laid down next to Wren. "You wanna join us, Wren?"

Wren couldn't help but smile back. "Of course, Ivy."

She turned to Sky briefly. "You too?"

Sky nodded. "Sure!"

No one said anything as they sat in silence, staring up at the stars. As Wren laid down, she could faintly hear her own breathing, and once she listened for it, she could hear the others' breathing as well. The grass beneath her was scratching her arms, but she didn't pay it any mind as the wind brushed against her face. She could feel Ivy lean into her a bit - if not due to the soft rustling of the grass, then the warmth of Ivy's body.

Wren quietly turned to Ivy. "Cold?" she asked with a laugh.

Her cheeks flushing, Ivy nodded. "A b-bit. Did you mind-?"

"Not at all." Wren could feel her own cheeks heating up, but she ignored it and glanced back up at the sky. She could hear Leaf's muffled laughter from her other side - not hesitating, she slapped his wrist, huffing. "Stop ruining the moment!"

Leaf rolled his eyes, swatting her back. "Hey, it's not my fault you both are so easy to tease!"

"We are *not*!" Wren wanted to hit him again, but thought better of it, looking over at Sky, who was smothering a few giggles. "Sky! We aren't *that* easy to tease, are we?"

Sky looked like he was resisting the urge to laugh. "Well, I wouldn't say you're easy to tease..."

"You know what, I take back what I said," Leaf chimed in, smirking. "You both simply give us several opportunities to."

Wren glowered at him. "I wasn't *asking* you."

Ivy let out a snort of amusement. "They aren't entirely wrong, though." *I...suppose they might not be wrong, but...* Ivy gave Wren a

small smile. "We can just focus on stargazing instead. I mean, look at how many there are! Do you think it's possible to even count them all?"

With a quiet chortle, Sky tilted his head up at the sky. "That'd be a *lot* of counting, Ivy." *A lot sure is an understatement...*

"I've tried, actually." Leaf's gaze was on the sky as well, a somewhat wistful grin on his face. *He...he really found the time and patience for something like that?* "I've only ever managed to get to one hundred fifty four, though. I always fell asleep when I got to the late one hundreds."

"What drove you to do *that*?" Wren asked, an eyebrow raised. He turned to her, his expression vaguely amused.

"Well, it was you," he replied with a shrug. "Don't you remember when you dragged me out of the house just to look at the stars? And then it immediately devolved into a competition to count the most stars...I kept trying because it helped remind me of you. And maybe I just wanted to try beating you at something other than blueberry picking."

*He kept trying, even after I...?* Wren struggled to fight back the tears beginning to well up. "That's...really sweet, actually. Just remember that I'm probably going to beat you at that, and then eventually blueberry picking."

Leaf let out a half snort, half scoff. "In your dreams." Yawning, he curled up on his side, casting her one last look over his shoulder. "And I bet I can beat you at falling asleep the fastest, too."

"Oh, you're going *down*," Wren shot back, rolling onto her other side. Ivy just sighed expressively once Wren gestured for Ivy to move over a bit, eventually getting up momentarily for her. "Thank you, Ivy."

"I think you mean going to sleep!" he called back. After a brief moment of quiet, he added, "Goodnight you guys."

Wren wanted to yell something back at him, but she knew it

probably wouldn't do anyone any good. *And I think he was planning on heading to sleep soon, anyways.* Resting her head on her arms, she shut her eyes, already thinking of the morning.

...

"Wren, wake up!"

She woke up to a barely contained whisper - though she felt the light shaking was the thing that did the trick. *I didn't wake up first. That's...a development.* Her gaze soon landed on Ivy after looking around the clearing for a while - the others were still asleep, while Ivy was sitting upright, sort of hovering over Wren. *Three moons, how even is* Ivy *of all people up so early?* She could barely make out Ivy's face, which was the most telling that it was just starting to turn to dawn. *I don't think I like this. Didn't she go to sleep later than I did?*

Wren rubbed her eyes, yawning quietly. "Mmph...Ivy, how in the three moons did you wake up before me?"

Ivy nervously fidgeted with her hair. "How mad would you be if I told you that I didn't sleep at all?"

*Seriously? I have half a mind to wake up Leaf just to tell him...* "Ivy, I'm not going to be like Leaf and get all frustrated and annoyed with you, but as your friend I *will* say that your sleeping habits genuinely concern me sometimes."

She let out a shaky laugh. "I'll admit, they concern *me* as well."

Meeting her eyes for a moment, Wren narrowed her gaze at her. "You're more on edge than I've ever seen you - I mean, not that I've seen you on edge often, but...you know what I mean. Something up?"

She glanced to her left briefly before looking back at Wren. "I might be hearing wrong and I did make an attempt at pulling an all-nighter, but I...I think I might have heard something."

"From the Indestructible City?" she prompted. Ivy just nodded, her expression grim. "That's...odd. Even I'm not up this early."

"I know, that's the confusing part!" Ivy added in an mildly terrified whisper. "Do you think we should go check it out really quick? I'm really concerned."

Wren grimaced, getting up. "Probably, just to be safe. Just follow my lead if you're coming with me."

Ivy did the same, huffing quietly. "Of course I'm coming with you. I'm not the best protection, but...I'd like to think I'm better at self-defense than when I first left Valor."

Holding back a few chuckles, Wren gave her a curt nod. "Got it. We'll just look around for a bit, and if it looks bad, we'll come back, wake up Leaf and Sky, and immediately leave."

"Alright."

Ivy was a bit slow to react, but nodded back. *Hngh, this might not be the best idea...she hasn't had any sleep at all, apparently.* Wren doubted she would be able to convince Ivy to back down now, though. *But I know she just wants to help. I really don't want to deny her that.*

Not hesitating, Wren began heading towards her usual path out of the valley, gesturing to Ivy. *Hopefully not many people are up, or that it just turns out to be something Ivy just misheard. Not that I want to doubt her, but...I really do not want to make two trips to that city in one day.* Neither of them had said much during the whole walk, outside of Wren having to keep Ivy from falling asleep. *I really should've tried to convince Ivy to get some more rest instead of coming with. She probably needs it, all things considered.*

*And if something bad is happening...well, even if she's gotten better at it since then, I still don't think Ivy's the best at any sort of combat,* Wren mused, then eventually added, *Or good at any sort of combat, but we can work on that later.*

After what felt like forever, they had arrived near the line into the Indestructible City. Several guards seemed to be out - more than what Wren had remembered seeing during her last visit. *That does...not look good.* Wren subconsciously began reaching for her

sword, though she only had her hand hovering over the handle. Ivy was standing next to her, slightly more alert than before, but still extremely tired. *And having a sleep-deprived Ivy with me makes this situation even* worse.

"Moons, that's...a lot of guards," Ivy mumbled, sounding like she was trying to force a yawn back down. "I know this place is considered the safest place to live compared to other villages, and that my dad only hired probably a handful of guards compared to what the Invincible Lord has, but..."

Wren scowled. "More than they usually have, which is my biggest concern. Especially since it's just barely dawn." She leaned in a bit closer to Ivy, grumbling quietly. "Perhaps we should've traded in Valor instead. It's unsettling."

Ivy took Wren's other hand, a conflicted expression on her face. "I guess so. Now I *really* wish I hadn't given reasons why we shouldn't trade in Valor at the moment..."

Glaring at her for a moment, Wren scoffed. "Not your fault. Blame the stupid Invincible Lord for making the worst possible decisions at the worst time." She took her other hand away from her sword and grimaced. "This place is making me feel anxious, and you need to get some sleep. Let's just go back to the others for now, alright?"

Inhaling sharply, Ivy nodded. "Yeah. Although I doubt you'll be able to get me back to sleep."

Letting out a quiet, nervous chuckle, Wren had to agree. "Well, we'll see what I can do."

Not much else was said between them as they began making their way back - all Wren could hear from Ivy was her breathing, which she could hear the shakiness in. *Is she also getting nervous about this place?* Wren couldn't blame her, if that was the case. She'd never been to the city before, and the first time she did see it, it just happened to be surrounded by more guards than necessary. *At least she's with me, and not on her own.*

Ivy took a glance behind her shoulder, then turned back to Wren.

"Hey, um...Wren? Do you think any of those guards might have saw us? Maybe I'm just overreacting, but..."

*Probably not, but...I can check just to make sure.* Wren cast a look over her shoulder just to check - though they were somewhat far away, Wren could spot a few guards staring in their direction. They were closer to the line than Wren and Ivy were, but close enough to perhaps catch up to them and question them both if they ran. *Not ideal in the slightest...they've probably seen us, too.* "We should pick up our pace. Don't start running or they will start chasing us."

Ivy tensed up, her eyes widening - but she said nothing and nodded. As they kept walking, Wren could feel her palms start to sweat. *At least one of them definitely saw us.* All she could really hope for was that they wouldn't other with them, or that they were looking at something else, but... *We're two teenagers by ourselves nearby the line. They're probably thinking we're suspicious.* Wren tried to pay it no mind and focus on making it back to the others, as well as making sure that Ivy was keeping up (not that there was much need to - Ivy was still holding her hand). *Just don't stress over it too much until you're in the clear.*

"The both of you, halt." Wren immediately froze upon hearing the voice, accidentally squeezing Ivy's hand in doing so. *They're probably a guard, aren't they?* She couldn't help but let out a deep, shaky, exhale.

"*Ivy*," Wren whispered. "Are they a guard?"

Ivy looked over her shoulder briefly, then bit her lip. "I think so. Should we start running?"

Wren shook her head slightly. "No, that'll just draw more attention and they'll definitely chase us. We'll...just confront them for a bit and try to get away as soon as possible." *I don't want to accidentally lead them to Sky and Leaf.* She cautiously turned back around in the direction of the city, narrowing her eyes at the person questioning them - sure enough, they were a guard. "What do you want with us?"

The guard took a few steps forwards, gesturing behind them. "Knew

something seemed off about you two."

Before Wren could demand an answer or Ivy could ask any questions, a few more guards seemed to notice the other guard's gesture, heading in their direction. Wren's gaze widened. *They're after us? What the hell did we even-?* There wasn't time to stand around and wonder - she made sure she had a firm grip on Ivy's hand before bolting back into the bushes, practically dragging Ivy until she managed to run for herself. Ivy had let out a small yelp when Wren began running, but she quickly pulled herself together and kept running, letting go of Wren's hand. She could hear footsteps racing after them now, which didn't make things much better. *I don't even know what they'd want with us! So why-*

*Wait.* Her thoughts paused briefly as she mulled it over, still running and beginning to run out of breath. *Undauntable might still be angry over my last visit...did he...?*

Moons, Wren really wanted to doubt that. Not only was it incredibly stupid if it was true, but also proved to Wren why she shouldn't ever trust others to stay out of her business and respect her wishes. *Well...besides Leaf and Ivy...and* maybe *Rowan and her friends.* She couldn't dwell on the reasons why and if it were true, however - she and Ivy needed to get out of there.

"Ivy, you-" Wren realised with a jolt that Ivy wasn't by her side, nor was she in front of her. Wren whipped around to see Ivy struggling to catch up, her face having specks of dirt rubbed off of her face. *Three moons, did she trip?*

She shook her head as she forced herself back up, frantically glancing over her shoulder. "Don't worry about me, keep running!"

*Don't worry about you-* Wren wanted to yell at her for suggesting that, because obviously she was going to be worried for her, but didn't bother. *She also wants me to stay safe.* She scanned the guards one last time - they were still close to them, and it'd be risky to go back and try to get Ivy. *But maybe they don't know Ivy, or care for her. It's probably me they're more concerned about getting if I'm right about Undauntable...*

*I don't care about that, though. I'm not leaving one of my friends behind.*

Sprinting back over to Ivy, Wren pulled Ivy back up, which seemed to only make Ivy look more anxious - Wren spoke up before Ivy could say anything. "I am *not* leaving you behind."

"I-" Ivy didn't finish her sentence, instead turning around to see one of the guards finally catching up to them. She let out a repressed shriek, then shoved Wren a bit. "Go!"

Wren was startled and wanted to snap at her for it, but didn't get the chance - the guard had taken hold of her as soon as Wren tried to flee once more. She attempted to fight back - flailing, kicking, hell, she'd probably try biting if she could get close enough. But it didn't work, and it only seemed to make the guard hold on to her tighter. Before much longer, the others had arrived, taking hold of Ivy as well.

Wren practically growled at them, trying to kick one of the guards again. "What the hell do you even *want* from us?!"

They ignored her, which only enraged her more. The one holding onto her glanced at the others. "Keep heading in the direction these two were running in. There might be others."

*Leaf and Sky are-* Wren immediately yanked her arm back, screaming profanities at the guards. *They are not finding them. If they do anything to them, I'll-* Ivy was also struggling, but she only seemed to be able to do so much. *Ivy, you need to try harder! They can't find them, especially not Sky-*

All her efforts were in vain, of course. Once a few other guards left to go check ahead, the ones holding onto her and Ivy tightened their grips on them, now dragging them in the direction of the Indestructible City. Wren could barely make out Ivy's face, but she didn't need to guess that Ivy was terrified out of her mind. *And frankly, I am too.*

"W-what did we do?" Ivy asked, her voice filled with panic.

The guard holding onto Wren just rolled their eyes, glancing down

at Wren. "*You* are seeing the Invincible Lord." They narrowed their eyes at Ivy, seeming to be in thought. "You...well, the lord might find some use in you. Obviously you must be worth *something* to this girl."

*She's my friend, you moron! Of course she means something to me!* Wren wanted to make another attempt at fleeing, but at that point, she knew the guards would just bring them back, and would likely do more than just hold them down. *But...Leaf and Sky...* They were in danger.

*And the only thing we can do is hope they make it out of that valley.*

# Chapter 25: Leaf

**LEAF**

To say Leaf woke up confused would be an understatement.

"Wren...? Ivy...?" Neither of them were around - traces of them, sure, but he couldn't find either of them around.

*Where are they?* His heart was practically pounding on his chest. *Why would they even leave? Wren said we'd figure out the trading situation in the morning...* Regardless of why, they couldn't have gone far. He glanced over at Sky, who was still asleep. *I doubt he's noticed either of them, but...*

He gently nudged Sky's talon. "Hey, Sky? Wake up."

Sky groaned quietly, slowly opening an eye. "Mmrph...Leaf? You're up? Usually it's Wren who wakes me up..."

Leaf's gaze flickered around the valley's clearing briefly before nodding. "Uh...yeah, about that. I don't think I see Wren *or* Ivy around at all."

Almost immediately perking up, he glanced around as well. "I don't either. Do you think they just went to go get breakfast or something?"

*Them going off on their own wouldn't surprise me, but...* "Maybe." He checked over where Wren seemed to be sleeping again - the only thing that she'd left behind was her knapsack. *So whatever they left for, it obviously wasn't to trade.* He picked it up, slinging it over his shoulder. "Wren took her sword with, though. Does she usually do that when she goes hunting?"

Sky shook his head. "No...or at least, not that I've seen. She's only had that sword since...I think when she rescued me from that dragon palace." He got up, stretching his wings a bit. "But I don't

think she usually would bring any weapons like that with her if she went hunting, or went trading."

"Hmm," Leaf quietly hummed to himself, also picking up his sheathed sword. *Regardless of what they might've left for, if Wren felt the need to take her sword with her, then I probably should as well.* "Maybe we should look around for them. They couldn't have gone too far, right? And Wren clearly didn't head over there to trade..." *And I don't see any reason why she'd bring Ivy with her if she did.*

"Yeah, probably," Sky agreed, his tail tip twitching nervously - or at least, that's what Leaf guessed. *I seriously need to get better at reading dragon expressions if I'm going to stick with Wren, Ivy, and Sky after finding that golden dragon...at least I'm getting better?* "Are you going to go by yourself? Because if you are, I should probably find a better hiding spot..."

*I mean, I could do that, but...it doesn't feel very safe to do around this area.* He slung his sword sheath's strap around his chest and back, shaking his head. "No. Safety in numbers is more preferable around here, I'd say."

Nodding slightly, Sky looked around a bit before gesturing towards the part of the valley that morphed into more forest. "I think they went that way." He started walking in that direction, with Leaf walking alongside him.

*Maybe I should ask if I could sit on his shoulder? I don't want to slow us down,* he mused, but quickly pushed the idea aside. *No, I think that might make me feel nauseous, with or without the flying...* Regardless, Sky's assumption seemed to be correct - though faint, Leaf could spot Ivy and Wren's shoeprints in the flattened grass. *Just how far did they go?*

As they headed further into the forest, Leaf could feel his anxiety rising. There was still no sign of Wren and Ivy, other than the trail they left behind. *And Sky would probably be able to find them better than I would, since he's a dragon and all...but he hasn't said anything about finding them.* Or at least, that's what Leaf wanted to assume, in any case. *I'd ask, but...would that be considered rude? Maybe I should've asked Ivy or Wren more about dragons, it's not like I've had*

*much education on them outside of Rowan, Grove, and...the dragonmancers, I* guess. Leaf didn't want to dwell on that - or rather, it was rather impossible to in the first place. His mind was practically racing with possibilities on what might've happened to Wren and Ivy instead; it didn't help that their shoeprints seemed to be leading closer to-

"The Indestructible City...?" he whispered to himself. *Why would they head there? Especially so early...*

Sky's expression was definitely a frown - he shifted a little closer to Leaf. "I don't like this."

Leaf was inclined to agree with him. "Neither do I. Maybe we should-" He paused, overhearing something rustling further in the bushes. "Do you hear that?" he asked, dropping his voice to a whisper.

Slowly nodding, Sky's gaze darted around the area nervously. "I think it's other humans." *Other humans? That's...not good.*

"Do you hear Wren and Ivy at all?" *I mean, they probably aren't with them, but...it doesn't hurt to make sure.*

"No...I think they *might* be talking about them, but..."

*Oh, moons no. Whoever those people are, clearly they had* something *to do with whatever happened to Wren and Ivy.* "We should head back to the valley."

Sky didn't have to say anything to tell Leaf he agreed - which Leaf was honestly grateful for, since he wasn't sure if talking any more would be safe. *They might have already heard us, but we could get lucky...* They began to retrace their steps, making sure to avoid stepping on anything that could further alert their presence. Leaf didn't feel it helped them much, though - the rustling noises just grew louder, making it even more clear they were aware of Leaf and Sky's presence. Unable to bear it, Leaf looked over his shoulder to check - surely enough, there were people now following them. They were dressed in that same armour Wren had described to him and Ivy - spikes covering their helmets and shoulder-plates, a few

armed as well. *The Indestructible City is after us? What did we-?*

He shook off the question. There wasn't any time to ask why and what was going on, he and Sky had to get out of there. Leaf picked up his pace, only to trip over his own foot as he ran. He let out a yelp, alerting Sky. He was about to say something to Sky, but stopped himself once he saw how close the guards were to him. Soon he could feel something grabbing onto his arms - the guards, he had to guess. Violently jerking his arm forwards, he could just barely manage to shake off one of them.

"Sky, a little help over here?" he called. Perking up, Sky came rushing over - without too much trouble, Sky pried the remaining guards off of Leaf, placing him on his back. "Do you think you can fly us out of here?"

Sky grimaced - or at least, from what Leaf could guess. "I can try, but...what about Wren and Ivy?"

Leaf glanced up in the Indestructible City's direction. *Do they have them, then?* Regardless, he didn't see any possible way they could go look for them. *Safely, at least.* He shook his head. "We'll have to come back for them later."

Despite the look of confliction on his face, Sky nodded, beginning to take off. Leaf tried his hardest to ignore how his stomach seemed to drop as Sky did so - they needed to get out of there, his flight-sickness and dislike of flying in the first place aside. *We both need to stay safe for Wren and Ivy's sakes...otherwise we won't be able to help them out.* Once they finally seemed to leave the guards and city behind, Leaf let out a sigh of relief. They were still flying, opposite of the Indestructible City.

"Where do we go after this?" Sky asked - Leaf wasn't entirely sure if the question was meant for him, or just in general.

Leaf wanted to cross his arms, if not for the fact that he still felt like he'd easily fall off. "Maybe we should stick with heading to Rowan's village for the time being. It's closer to us than Valor, and I think it might do us better to be around people we know for the time being." *Or at least...somewhat knows, in Sky's case.*

"Yeah, that sounds like a good idea," Sky agreed, pausing momentarily to glance around. There didn't seem to be as many dragons up yet, from what Leaf could tell, and it was possible the soldiers had given up on their chase. *I wouldn't put it past them to keep following us, though. It isn't like we haven't seen them trying before.* "Hopefully they can help us."

*I doubt there's much we could do to get Wren and Ivy back, even with their help.* Leaf didn't want to burst his bubble, though. "I hope so as well." Adjusting his position on Sky's neck slightly, he exhaled deeply. "We might need to take a longer or a different route there, though. I don't want to risk leading any of those soldiers over to the new village." *Plus, who knows what they might want if they found out about the place, let alone the lord...*

Sky just nodded, not saying much. Leaf felt like he probably should've made an attempt at continuing the conversation, but he wasn't sure how to continue it. *And I don't think I want to. What else is there to talk about, other than losing Wren and Ivy and hoping that we'll be able to get to Rowan's village?* He just held on a bit tighter as Sky resumed flying, now headed North.

...

Somehow, they had made it.

It had taken them a couple of days, mostly full of guessing where Rowan and her friends were planning on building the village and being plagued with anxiety if the soldiers had followed them after all (well, mostly just Leaf). But they had made it, without too much trouble. They were resting by the closest riverbank, not saying much. Leaf had his hands dug into his pockets while Sky finished taking a drink from the river. *This shouldn't have happened,* he thought. *Ivy and Wren should be with us.*

There wasn't much good dwelling on that, though. Every time he did, he just felt empty and useless, like there was something more he could've done to prevent it. *And it's not like it'll bring them back.* He needed to push those thoughts aside for the time being.

"We should probably start looking for them," he suggested,

attempting to grab Sky's attention. "They're probably somewhere around here." *Hopefully, anyways.*

Sky turned to face him. "Well, where do we start looking?"

Leaf thought for a moment. *Well, there's still daylight...Rowan and Grove might be out fishing, like usual.* He wasn't sure if they ever actually *fished* whenever they said they were going out to do so, but...it was worth a try. "We can just walk along this river for now. Rowan and Grove sometimes go fishing on this river around this time of day."

He gave him a short nod. "Alright."

Neither of them said anything as they walked beside the river. Leaf's gaze flitted back and forth between the riverbank and trees. *I really hope that at least one of them is out...I don't think they've ever told us where they planned on building their village. I really don't want to go on a scavenger hunt for it, and I bet Sky doesn't want to, either.* Leaf couldn't help but glance up at Sky every so often - the mountain dragon's gaze was flickering around as they kept walking along the river, but there was a clear frown on his face. *He must not be feeling all that great about this, either.*

*...Of course he wouldn't, you daft blueberry. He and Wren are practically family at this point, and now she got taken away from him.* Leaf found it impossible to blame him for it - it wasn't like Leaf didn't feel the same way. He'd grieved Wren for years, found out she was alive, and rode a *dragon* of all things just to reunite with her - only for this to happen? It felt like some cruel joke, or some nightmare he still hadn't woken out of.

And it certainly didn't help that apparently Ivy was taken as well. He hadn't known her that long, but he would be lying if he said he didn't consider her to be one of his closest friends. She managed to make him smile, and stuck by him - not once had she lied to him, and always seemed to be honest in what she said. *And she's really pleasant to be around...I don't think I've seen Wren give many people her more genuine smiles, obviously except for Sky...maybe me on rare occasions? Well, Ivy might just have that effect on people, but...*

As he continued to let his thoughts race, they suddenly came to a halt once he remembered who they would be visiting: Rowan. He knew well by now that he and Sky didn't have many other options, but the more he thought about it, the more he began to resent suggesting the idea. *I know she's sorry for lying to me about Wren, and that it didn't matter much since Wren's been alive this whole time, but...* It still hurt to think about. That his desire to protect people and be a hero was just used for greed - how he wasted all that time training to fight dragons, only for Rowan to tell him it was the dragonmancers' fault. *Her and Grove lied to me, and Rowan apparently couldn't find it in her to tell me until we got put into a life or death situation. Were they ever going to tell me anything?* That was a stupid question to ask, though - they likely were, at some point. Regardless, the idea of seeing Rowan again wasn't the most appealing once he thought about it. *It's better than nothing, I suppose...and besides, I can't really back out of this now...*

Before he could spiral off into his thoughts again, Leaf soon spotted Grove, who was sitting on the riverbank, fishing. *So only Grove's out here, then? Strange...maybe Rowan's busy doing something else.* Leaf couldn't exactly pinpoint his expression, but judging from the way his shoulders were slumped, Grove wasn't in the best of moods. *Maybe now isn't the best time, but...it's not like just standing here will get us anywhere.*

Grove noticed them approaching, perking up slightly. He got up from where he sat, walking over. Leaf could've sworn he saw at least a small hint of apprehension from Grove (likely due to Sky, if Leaf had to guess - not like Leaf could blame him), but it didn't seem to hinder him much. A small grin was on his face.

"Hey, kid!" Grove greeted him - Leaf simply smiled back at him, waving. "Didn't expect to see you here so soon. Thought that quest you and the others were on would take longer than that."

Leaf chuckled awkwardly, scratching the back of his neck. "It's more of Ivy's quest than any of ours, really." He stopped forcing himself to laugh soon after. "We haven't had the best luck, though."

Grove looked like he was about to say something reassuring, before suddenly stopping himself. "Where's Wren? As well as your friend

Ivy?" he asked, his expression growing more concerned by the second. "...Is everything alright?"

Leaf couldn't find it in him to keep holding Grove's gaze after that question. *What am I supposed to answer to that?* He knew that everything obviously *wasn't* okay - Wren and Ivy were gone, they didn't know what those soldiers from the Indestructible City wanted with them, and they didn't know what to do about the situation. Sky likely didn't know, either. *But I don't want to admit that this whole thing went wrong.* Leaf would have to acknowledge that this wasn't some nightmare he was unable to wake up from. It was their reality.

"You don't have to tell me now, if you don't want to," Grove murmured; he glanced over his shoulder, grimacing. "And besides...it'd probably be best if we headed for the village instead. Rowan and the others will want to see you, plus they should probably hear it too."

Leaf almost let out a sigh of relief, simply nodding. Giving Sky a quick glance, he began following Grove, who already took off. *At least I don't have to tell anyone now, but...* It was only becoming more apparent that he would have to explain at some point. *If not me, then Sky will...* He wasn't all too sure if Sky would feel comfortable sharing it. *I mean, I'm not, but...I don't want to push the responsibility onto him.*

He couldn't quite stop himself from debating how he was going to tell them as they kept walking.

As they were stepping over various roots and fallen branches, he couldn't help but perk up a bit upon overhearing rustling from deeper in the forest. *Is that...an animal?* he mused, frowning in the sound's direction. *No, can't be. I think I hear voices as well...maybe Rowan, Cranberry, or Thyme?* Probably not, though - the voices sounded familiar, sure, but not really like any of his friends. *Plus, they're older. Rowan, Thyme, and hell, even Cranberry have deeper voices than that.* If anything, the voices reminded him more of Ivy and Wren's voices, if anything. *And maybe Daffodil and Violet's now that I think about it.*

Not long after, soon he saw two figures running through the trees - though it was more of one being chased by the other, if anything. He recognised one of them in a heartbeat - Bluebell. *Bluebell? She...she's here?* Bluebell didn't seem to notice them, however. She seemed far more focused on chasing her target with a branch, who Leaf eventually realised another person from Talisman - Tadpole. He couldn't help but feel a bit cautious; Tadpole was a dragonmancer apprentice too, wasn't he? *I have no room to talk, though...so was I.* Still, it didn't make him feel any less wary. Tadpole still almost got Grove sacrificed, and never seemed to disobey them, at least to Leaf. *Or at least, he never got punished as much as I did. That has to count for* something*, doesn't it?*

Grove narrowed his eyes at them, specifically Tadpole. "I...wouldn't worry too much about him. He hasn't tried anything yet." '*Yet'? So Grove doesn't trust him, either.* That didn't help calm his nerves, but it did relieve him to see that he wasn't alone in his concerns. "Camellia's probably scared him out of doing anything, anyways."

*Camellia's here too?* He guessed he shouldn't be too surprised - his older sisters were probably the first people Rowan would go to. *Mallow is probably with her too, then. Those two are practically inseparable.* Somehow, knowing his second oldest sister was also at the village made him feel worse about suggesting the idea. *At least she isn't as suspicious as Tadpole, but...Camellia's scary. And annoying.*

"If you say so," Leaf mumbled in response. He wasn't all to sure if he wanted to believe that as of now. "Are they friends or something?"

Grove only grimaced, shrugging. *Well...I guess they're probably having fun. Or at least, Bluebell is.*

"I need to talk to them while we're here, anyways. They should be gathering more materials, not messing around for the tenth time today," he grumbled. Leaf just stayed next to Sky as Grove walked ahead. "Are you chasing Tadpole around with a stick *again*?"

Tadpole immediately stopped running, freezing upon hearing Grove's voice. Bluebell, however, didn't stop herself in time - she slammed head first into Tadpole, yelping. She landed on top of him, causing him to groan. The stick hit Tadpole on the head, which Leaf

couldn't help but clench his teeth at. Bluebell quickly apologised to him once she seemed to realise, scrambling off of him. Tadpole just let out a pathetic groan, standing up. It made Leaf feel...sort of bad for him.

Bluebell smiled innocently at Grove. "We were just taking a break. We got a bunch of stuff, see?" She proudly gestured to the stick that had hit Tadpole, now laying on the ground. It was slightly bent, now that Leaf got a better look at it. Tadpole just gave her a despairing look, as if he couldn't believe what he was hearing.

"And you aren't going to purposefully start another fight with Camellia when you get back," Grove deadpanned, entirely unamused. "Just...go back to camp, alright? I need go discuss something with Cran, and I'd rather everyone there for simplicity's sake."

Smirking, Bluebell rolled her eyes. "You *always* need to talk with Cranberry."

"I-" Grove began, his cheeks flushed a violent red. "Just go!"

Bluebell just took off, giggling as she did so. Tadpole looked like he wanted to apologise to him, but said nothing, rushing off in the direction Bluebell headed. Grove didn't say anything either, instead returning over to where Leaf and Sky were standing. His cheeks were still flushed, which Leaf found a bit amusing, but he wasn't going to even attempt saying anything. *I don't think I'd want to, even...*

"Are you okay?" Sky asked, seemingly unaware of why.

Grove just sighed, looking away. "Bluebell's just...being Bluebell."

*That bad, huh?* Leaf couldn't help but be amused - of course Bluebell would tease him about that. He was willing to bet that Bluebell was worse about it towards Rowan, though. *Not like I'm much better with Wren and Ivy...* It made him wonder how much more Bluebell would tease Wren about Ivy than he normally did. *Actually, I don't need to think about it so much. Bluebell would.*

"I didn't know you guys would bring my other sisters to the village..." Leaf remarked off-handedly to Grove; they had resumed their walk to the camp. "Is Mallow there too? Since apparently Camellia's there."

Grimacing, Grove simply let out a grunt. *She didn't make the best impression on the others, did she?* Leaf admittedly wouldn't be all that surprised if that was the case - he didn't spend too much time around Camellia, but a little was enough for him to tell she had no patience for anyone except for Mallow, and Mallow only. *Moons, she's probably been yelling at Rowan since getting here...*

*About Wren, most likely,* he realised, a knot forming in his stomach. *I completely forgot about how the others would react to the news.*

It wasn't something Leaf thought of often - how his other sisters reacted to the fake news of Wren's death. *Or how'd they react to seeing her alive again,* he added. He knew that Wren barely ever got along with their older siblings and they didn't seem to hang around her too much, but...Rowan also felt awful about it. *But she might just be guilty for causing it, right?* Leaf could see Camellia getting angry with Rowan for hiding it and lying to them, but not being mad because she cared about Wren. *Maybe Bluebell cared, but...*

"Well, I'm excited to meet Wren's other siblings! Properly this time," Sky said, breaking the awkward silence. *Camellia isn't someone you'd want to meet 'properly,' though...* Leaf decided to stay quiet for Sky's sake. *I'm not going to be the one to crush that.*

Grove didn't seem to have much of a reply to that. Instead he bit his tongue and kept walking at a more brisk pace. *Is he thinking the same thing, then?* Leaf guessed so, but then again, Grove seemed less talkative than he usually was with Leaf. *Is it...because of Sky?* It wouldn't surprise Leaf if that was the case, if he was being honest with himself. While he hadn't paid too much attention to how Grove reacted to Sky when they helped him and Rowan out of Talisman's jail, he already knew Grove was...shocked that Sky could speak their language, to say the least. *And his burn scars stick out like a sore thumb...* Leaf couldn't really blame Grove if he was uncomfortable.

*But even if it's reasonable, I still feel kind of bad for Sky.* Leaf fell back a bit to walk alongside Sky. "Hey, um. Sky?"

Tilting his head, the mountain dragon glanced at him. "Yeah?"

"I know you might be excited to meet Wren's other siblings, but...just try to keep in mind that what happened in Talisman might still be fresh in their minds," Leaf reminded him, trying to keep his voice down.

Sky seemed to be in thought for a moment, then nodded. "I'll keep that in mind."

Grove shrugged lightly. "Honestly, just prepare for the worst with Camellia." He paused briefly, then added, "Maybe Tadpole, but..."

"I'm pretty sure he's scared of everything," Leaf scoffed quietly. "Just talking with you made him look like a gentle breeze would knock him over."

Looking a smidge conflicted, Grove crossed his arms. "Maybe so, but..."

*Maybe I shouldn't say anything else about Tadpole for now, even if I'm not entirely wrong about him being terrified of everything.* Leaf had to guess that it was Cranberry's decision to let Tadpole stay - especially considering how Grove was acting about it. *Still, I find it hard to believe they settled it without arguing over it. Did Cranberry actually win one of their fights, or...?* He didn't want to think about Grove and Cranberry's relationship right now. *I need to just...focus on getting to their camp. And figuring out how to tell everyone how I couldn't protect Wren and Ivy.*

...

Soon enough they had reached the camp - or at least, something that resembled what was supposed to be a camp. A few shelters were put together, being rather small. *They* are *trying to start off with shelters, so that's something, at least,* he told himself. *But I can't help but feel like they could've had more progress done by now.* Leaf wasn't going to say that out loud, though. In the center of the camp was a

pile of rocks and charred wood, smelling of ash - the fire, obviously. Almost as soon as they had arrived, Grove plopped onto the ground, laying on his back. His gaze was focused on the sky, barely wavering.

Leaf took another look around. The only ones there were him, Grove, and Sky. "Erm, Grove? Shouldn't Bluebell and Tadpole be back by now?" Grove's only response was a noncommittal shrug. *Maybe he's just used to this happening with them?* Either way, it was the least reassuring answer Leaf could've heard. *Well, actually - probably not, but I really don't want to think like that...and Bluebell and Tadpole probably know how to avoid getting themselves killed.*

The silence that followed wasn't helping Leaf's mood, either.

He took a seat near the unlit fire, placing his sword to his side. Gesturing to Sky, Leaf let him lay down next to his other side. Sky seemed somewhat anxious and uneasy - Leaf wasn't entirely sure. *I...still don't understand how Wren can decipher dragon expressions that well.* He wanted to slap himself almost immediately for thinking that. Of *course* she would, she literally *lived* with a dragon most of her life, and she practically raised Sky. Why *wouldn't* she understand dragon expressions better than Leaf could? *All this dragon stuff is just...so confusing at times.*

"Leaf?" Sky asked, nudging him as gently as he could.

Turning around, Leaf couldn't help but feel a bit startled - he tried his best to hide it, though. "Yes?"

"You feeling alright? Your face reminded me of Wren's when she's frustrated."

*Like...as in facial expressions, or because we're related?* Leaf didn't want to change the topic so suddenly, however. "Oh, I'm just...thinking about things." *Things that honestly, I wish didn't confuse me so much.* "It's nothing, really."

Sky didn't look convinced, but didn't argue. "Okay. Just making sure."

Leaf turned his attention back to the ground in front of him, sighing quietly. *I really shouldn't be thinking about that, anyways.* He needed to figure out how to explain everything to Rowan and the others - preferably without tears welling up in his eyes, like when he thought of telling Grove. *I don't want to tell them what happened. That would just mean accepting that my sister and friend are gone.* Leaf tried to distract himself from the thoughts by playing with the grass scratching against his legs, but it only made him feel worse.

Eventually, the sound of rushing footsteps caught Leaf's - and Sky's - attention. Grove, however, just let out what sounded like his tenth sigh of annoyance for that day. Bluebell burst through the bushes, several leaves and twigs stuck in her hair. She had a wild grin on her face, and was holding a single blueberry in one hand, while hauling a giant stick in her other. Tadpole also came out, stuck carrying the rest of the blueberries - an obvious expression of frustration was on his face, but he didn't seem all that upset. It wasn't all that long before either of them noticed Leaf and Sky, though.

Bluebell's eyes went wide for a moment, regarding both Leaf and Sky - then she quickly whipped around to glare at Grove. "Oh, come *on*! You seriously didn't bother to tell me that my little brother is here? How much worse could you possibly *get*?"

Sitting up, Grove rolled his eyes at her. "I *wanted* to discuss things with Cranberry first before you and the others found out, so you wouldn't overwhelm them." He raised an eyebrow at her. "Speaking of her, do you know why she's not back yet? She promised to be back before I was finished fishing."

"If you were fishing, then where's the fish?" Bluebell muttered. Tadpole tore his gaze away from Sky and Leaf, only to elbow Bluebell's arm. "Fine, fine! No, I don't. Maybe she's trying to sort things out between Rowan and Camellia, but...I don't see the point. It's one of their nastier fights, and *Camellia's* involved. How could anyone think they can resolve *that*?"

*Ivy probably would,* Leaf thought sadly. He never really understood how she was so good at it, even though she had Daffodil and Violet for best friends - but it was something he honestly admired.

*I...honestly don't think I'd want to try and settle conflicts like that, especially if I'm not directly involved.* And if he was being truthful, he'd probably be awful at helping anyone in that sort of situation.

Grove frowned, visibly concerned. "I know it's one of their nastier fights. I just...hope that they're all okay."

Bluebell ignored him, bounding over to Leaf. "*Any*ways!" She practically beamed at Leaf, taking his hands. "Leaf! You came!"

He couldn't help but smile back. "Yeah. I wasn't expecting to see you here, Bluebell."

Smirking, Bluebell scoffed at him. "Well, there was no way I *wasn't* going to miss the opportunity to build a whole town!" A teasing glint shone in her eyes. "Did you really think you'd be able to get rid of your older sister that easily?"

Leaf almost let out a snort of laughter. "Of course not. You're Bluebell."

Bluebell giggled a bit, before glancing over at Sky, who gave her a friendly smile (or at least, Leaf assumed that was it). "And...you're the dragon Wren brought with her to Talisman, right? Thank you for getting rid of those stupid dragonmancers, by the way."

"Yep! You're welcome," Sky replied - Leaf could tell from the tone of his voice that Sky was trying his hardest to seem as unthreatening as he could. "I'm Sky."

Bluebell wasn't able to speak for some time; her mouth was agape as she stared at him. Suddenly turning to Leaf, her shocked expression didn't falter one bit. "He *talks*?!"

Trying to hold back a few chuckles, Leaf nodded. "I was surprised when I first found out, too."

"That's *amazing*," she breathed. "Did Wren teach you?"

Sky lifted his chin slightly. "Of course! I also taught her some Dragon as well."

Though seeming overwhelmed, Bluebell still looked excited. "A whole language that dragons speak? Moons, that sounds so cool...unbelievable, almost." She glanced back at Leaf, a somewhat sad smile on her face. "I can't believe Wren never went back to tell me."

Leaf couldn't help but feel bad upon seeing Bluebell's expression. *Bluebell can be really irritating and immature, but...she did really care about Wren and I, didn't she?* It wasn't something that he often thought about - he didn't really think of his other sisters that often, outside of Wren and sometimes Rowan. Never had it occurred to him to think of how his other older sisters might have felt about the situation, whether it pertained to Wren getting sacrificed, or when Wren confronted the dragonmancers in Talisman. *I guess it doesn't help much that I don't talk to any of them that often, either?* Regardless, he guessed he shouldn't have been surprised that Bluebell seemed upset over it. Bluebell had always taken some pride in being the oldest out of her, Leaf, and Wren. *Even if she's...the worst role model in all of Pyrrhia. But I wouldn't say it to her face, I don't think...*

"Speaking of her, where *is* she? I thought she'd be with you guys," Bluebell asked, immediately causing Leaf's heart to skip a few beats. *Oh moons, I forgot that I'd also have to explain it to her since she's here...*

He doubted Bluebell would take it well - if she was upset over what happened in the other situations regarding Wren, then...well, he didn't want to imagine how she'd react. *I don't think I want to imagine how my other sisters will react, either...especially not Rowan...* Now that he had it on his mind, he realised that Rowan...might not be able to take the news well at all. *I want to believe that Wren forgiving Rowan helped ease her feelings about it all, but...somehow, I doubt that.*

Casting a sideways glance at Sky, he could tell that the mountain dragon *also* didn't want to explain it, either - Sky was just looking to the side, avoiding Leaf's gaze. *Me too, Sky.*

Bluebell was silent for a few more moments, then grimaced. "Something's up, then." She turned to Grove, concern and anxiety

melting into her expression. "Can I go find Cranberry and bring her back? The village's self-proclaimed mayor should be back by now, anyways."

Grove gave her a hesitant nod. "Go ahead. Tell any others you come across to come back as well, alright?" Bluebell had already shot off before he could finish his sentence, however. Grove just narrowed his eyes in the direction she took off in, muttering something underneath his breath.

*She just...took off.* He was a little startled by it, but...at least he didn't have to try and explain that everything was awful and how he was too incompetent to keep his little sister and friend safe. *I'm the oldest of us too...I should be able to keep them safe. But I couldn't, because...* He tried to brush away the thoughts just so he wouldn't start crying. Instead he just glanced around the camp, hoping to distract himself.

Soon he spotted Tadpole, who was still standing around awkwardly. Tadpole's gaze seemed to nervously flicker between Grove, Leaf and Sky, and in the direction Bluebell had taken off in. *Is he really that nervous?* Leaf couldn't blame him, he supposed - he probably was still struggling to wrap his head around the fact that there was a dragon directly in their camp, let alone the fact that Sky could speak. *Most people probably would, to be honest...then again, it doesn't help that Tadpole's afraid of almost everything.*

"You don't have to be scared of me," Sky said to Tadpole in what Leaf thought was his most friendly tone of voice yet. Tadpole yelped, falling onto his bottom. Leaf had to hold back a few chuckles - he didn't want to embarrass Tadpole even more.

"That's true," Leaf added, hoping Tadpole would listen to him instead of continuing to shiver in fear. "He's the friendliest dragon you'll meet, honestly."

Tadpole let out a wheezing laugh, still shaking. "Somehow I don't think those two words go together..." Almost immediately he trailed off, his eyes widening. Leaf raised an eyebrow at him. *Is he just that afraid of Sky, or...?* Probably not - Leaf decided not to press it, though. "S-sorry."

*What is he even apologising for?* he asked himself, then wanted to smack himself for forgetting. *Right, Sky.* Admittedly, Leaf was still finding it hard to watch his words while around Sky - despite having travelled with him for a while now, it was difficult to keep himself from saying something that wouldn't be considered odd or rude to say. *Then again, it's just Sky...most other dragons would just eat humans, ignore us, or act like Sweetface- er, whatever that desert dragon's name was...*

Leaf patted a spot next to him. "It's alright. Anyways, did you want to sit down next to me?" *This is probably the only way I'll even get him to sit down without Bluebell, to be honest...still, he should know that he doesn't need permission to sit down.*

Tadpole's face lit up for a moment, before he forced the smile away. He walked over to Leaf's other side, sitting down. From what Leaf could tell, Tadpole was still a little shaky, but seemed to be a bit better now that he was sitting down. *Is he...nervous around me too?* If that was the case, he honestly found it amusing. *I may not be frightening to dragons, but...I suppose this is a development?*

"So..." Leaf coughed after a few seconds of awkward silence. "Why did you come here?" Tensing up, Tadpole averted his gaze from Leaf's. Leaf grimaced, feeling a stab of guilt - maybe he shouldn't have asked it like that. *Or maybe I really shouldn't make that the first thing I ask him...* "You don't have to answer it if it makes you uncomfortable."

Shaking his head, Tadpole let out a deep exhale, frowning. "I-It's fine. I shouldn't have made assumptions - you have every right to be wary of me as well..." He inhaled sharply, his hands gripping onto his elbows. "I don't know if you've heard already, but...after you and the others left Talisman, the place sort of started to fall apart. Sure, the dragonmancers were being dealt with, but...us remaining dragonmancer apprentices got outcast by extension."

*They actually did something about them?* Leaf knew that his expectations for them really should've been higher, considering how most of the villagers reacted to the news about the dragonmancers. *But that was just the lying part they hated, wasn't it? Mother and Father clearly knew about the sacrifices and never seemed to feel bad about it.*

Whenever his parents did mention Wren, it was usually to remind him and his other sisters (though it was mainly just him and Bluebell) that it was Wren's fault for being disobedient, even going as far as to say that she should've known better than to constantly disobey the dragonmancers when they were already in a foul mood. Leaf doubted that the majority of the villagers there actually cared about the morality of what they had apparently been fine with for likely decades at that point - he tried to keep himself from thinking about that aspect, however. It made him sick to acknowledge how his parents would likely offer up him or his siblings if someone told them to.

A slight nudge to his shoulder caught Leaf's attention - it was Tadpole. "You okay?"

*Not really,* he desperately wanted to say. He wasn't going to just admit that - especially to Tadpole, of all people. "Just thinking about something. Don't worry about it." To Leaf's vague surprise, Tadpole's expression of concern didn't falter. *He doesn't need to worry about me. After we get Wren and Ivy back, I'll be fine...won't I?* "Ignoring that...go on. If you're still up for it."

Tadpole hesitantly nodded. "I...well, I left since it was getting to me. The dirty looks the other villagers gave me and the scathing remarks I got just..." He could only turn away at that point. "Well, you can figure out the rest from here."

Upon hearing that, Leaf couldn't help but feel bad for Tadpole. *I know he still almost got Grove sacrificed, but...he really doesn't deserve that treatment.* Tadpole likely didn't even know about the sacrifices, if Leaf's recollection of how he learned about them happened proved anything. *If I were in Talisman, still as a dragonmancer apprentice, would I get treated like Tadpole did?* He didn't particularly want an answer to that question, but he already knew the answer would be yes.

"I was really lucky that Cranberry allowed me to stay here. I'm hoping to make it up to everyone for my actions, but...I don't think it'll ever be enough." *So it was Cranberry who let him stay? I know she's generally a nice person, but...I wonder how she actually feels about Tadpole being here.*

Tadpole didn't have much to say after that, suddenly quiet. It honestly bugged Leaf, but he didn't want to push him. *Well, what am I supposed to say to that? Just 'oh, I'm sorry you had to deal with that' doesn't seem to cut it.* It didn't help that Leaf could only understand how Tadpole felt to a certain extent - sure, he was also a dragonmancer apprentice, but he was sure he would've remembered if he had sent someone off to get sacrificed. Instead, Leaf found himself brushing his hand against Tadpole's hand, albeit awkwardly. Tadpole tensed up a little, though this time Leaf felt that it wasn't as anxiety filled as the last time he tensed up.

"T-thanks," Tadpole mumbled, sighing.

*It's not much, but it's something, I suppose.* He wasn't sure if he had said the right things to Tadpole, or if he should've said more. *Either way, I did try...even if it wasn't a very good attempt.* Leaf just kept his hand against Tadpole's, unsure if he still needed that comfort. *If it's comforting to him at all? I feel like I'm just making him more nervous...*

Leaf gently nudged Tadpole's shoulder. "You, uh...you don't mind this, do you?"

His cheeks slightly flushed, he shook his head. "N-no, this is fine." Forcing out a sort of laugh, Tadpole glanced away. "It's better than your older sister yelling at me, anyways."

"Camellia, right?" Tadpole simply nodded, groaning. "Yeah, honestly anything beats that when you compare it to getting hollered at by her."

Tadpole let out on last stifled fit of laughter before turning away, saying nothing. *Well, making him laugh is something?* Leaf smiled a little before wiping it off his face, glancing back at the direction Bluebell took off from. *When's she going to get back? Did she get distracted or something?* He didn't want to assume the worst, but...it *had* been a while. The wait had went from a few seconds to several minutes - but before long, Bluebell burst back out of the bushes. She had an expression of frustration and annoyance that Leaf never thought he'd ever see on her face.

"I can't believe those two..." she grumbled, plopping down near the

put out fire. "Another fight! Cranberry had to intervene this time, too!"

*Is she referring to...Rowan and Camellia?* He didn't concern himself too much with the relationship between his two oldest sisters, but he knew enough to tell that with Camellia's temper and Rowan's tendency to ignore Camellia for whatever reason it was when they fought, a fight could only end in disaster when it came to them. *Mallow doesn't usually enjoy getting involved in fights, so...I can't think of anyone else.* The fact that Cranberry had to help them break it up worried him, though.

He didn't have much time to think about that, however - soon after Bluebell, Cranberry came stumbling out, with Camellia begrudgingly trailing behind her. A scowl was etched onto Cranberry's face, which Leaf had to guess was from dealing with Camellia, if the daggers Camellia was shooting Cranberry were anything to go by. Before he could wonder just how Cranberry got involved, another person stepped out of the bushes - Rowan. She not-so-subtly pushed Camellia from behind, glaring at her. Camellia just screamed a profanity or two at her before stomping over to one of the shelters, huffing as she laid down, facing the opposite direction. Cranberry just rolled her eyes, not commenting on it. Eventually the two came to a sudden stop once their gazes landed on Leaf and Sky. Rowan's mouth was open, her eyes wide.

"Leaf?"

# Chapter 26: Rowan

**ROWAN**

*Leaf. He's here.*

Rowan was still struggling to wrap her head around it. Didn't he and that friend of his plan on searching for some golden dragon? Why was he back so soon? *And...what happened to his friend?* Ivy was her name, wasn't it? She found it odd that she wasn't with him - they seemed fairly close, from what Rowan remembered. As she stood around pondering that, another thing suddenly hit her: *Wren.*

*Wren. Oh, moons, where's Wren?* Her dragon companion, Sky, was there - he was simply resting his chin on his talons, perking up slightly upon noticing Rowan, Camellia, and Cranberry's arrival. If Rowan was reading dragon expressions correctly, Sky seemed to have...something of a frown on his face. Sad looking, even. *I somehow doubt that he'd have that face if Wren were here.*

"Rowan, you're shaking," Cranberry murmured, gently brushing her hand against Rowan's. "You can sit down and rest for a while, okay? You've had a long enough day as is."

Rowan tried to stop the trembling, but only found that trying made her shake more. "O-okay," she replied, nodding. She trudged over to where Grove was sitting, then hesitantly curled up against his shoulder.

*Wren's gone, Wren's gone, Wren's-*

She felt Grove's hair rub against her cheeks and neck - his arm tightly wrapped around her shoulders. Rowan just let him rub her back, though she didn't notice it that much. *She can't be gone, can she?* Rowan just kept her gaze on Cranberry, trying to keep her thoughts from spiraling. Cranberry had her gaze on Leaf and Sky, assessing them carefully - just as she opened her mouth, two people came bursting through the bushes behind her. Cranberry held back

what sounded like a growl, likely of annoyance. It was Thyme and Mallow - the latter of which came to a sudden halt once she spotted Sky. She let out a shriek upon seeing him, dropping her supplies and falling onto the ground - Thyme flinched upon hearing it. Camellia shot up, glancing at them. She rushed over to Mallow, helping her up. Mallow shakily accepted her help, leaning onto Thyme as they walked over to the center of the camp. From the corner of her eye, Rowan caught the slightly hurt expression on Sky's face - she guessed it was mainly due to Mallow's reaction. *It isn't the most surprising reaction, though.* In all honesty, Rowan was more surprised that Tadpole was sitting next to Leaf. *Maybe he isn't as cowardly as I thought...or maybe he's just more comfortable around Leaf.*

Cranberry shot one last impatient glare at the bushes before turning back to Leaf. "Never mind that. So...you're back."

Leaf took his hand away from Tadpole's, crossing his arms. "Yeah. Shit happened."

"I can tell," Cranberry sighed. "Mind explaining what happened? We can talk in private, if you're more comfortable with that. I don't want to pressure you, Leaf."

Grimacing, Leaf shook his head. "No, I...I should tell everyone." He forced himself to meet Cranberry's gaze. "It happened a few days ago. When we woke up, Wren and Ivy were just...gone. Usually I'd assume they went out hunting, but...it was early, even for Wren. So we went looking for them, but..." Leaf paused momentarily to catch his breath. "We had to leave without them."

Rowan couldn't exactly tell what Cranberry was feeling, but judging from her expression, it wasn't good. "Why did you guys have to leave them behind?"

"I...well, I don't know why, but soldiers from the Indestructible City tried to attack us, or something like that," Leaf explained, his voice wavering. "I just barely managed to get away with Sky's help."

Sky lowered his head, blinking sadly. "It's true. Leaf and I both had trouble getting those guards to leave us alone...we don't know if we

managed to lose them." His chin rested on his talons, now looking away. "I should've done more."

Leaf looked like he wanted to argue, but didn't say anything. *Does he agree with Sky? That he should've done more?* Rowan sort of understood where he'd be coming from, if that was the case - but then again...the Dragonslayer existed. And the Indestructible City was called the 'Indestructible City' for good reason. As Rowan examined his expression a bit more, she picked up something that reminded her of...guilt? And anger. *Oh. Oh moons, is he blaming himself?* Moons, she hoped not - it wasn't his fault that any of that happened. *But he probably is.*

"I'm not sure what either of you could've done more," Cranberry eventually replied, speaking up before Rowan could work up the courage to tell them both the same thing. "I've only seen that place from afar back when I was travelling with my entertainment troupe, and the stories I've heard from both them and Grove...but it's enough to know it isn't your faults for what happened to Wren and Ivy. Okay?"

The both of them didn't look entirely convinced, but gave Cranberry a weak nod in response. *After this I'll try to talk to them. I don't want Leaf going through the same thing I did...and even if I'm still getting used to the idea of Sky, I don't want him having to deal with that, either.*

After a moment of silence, Grove sat up, catching Rowan off-guard. "So if I'm hearing you both right...you said the Indestructible City took them?"

He nodded gravely. "Yeah. We were resting nearby so Wren could go trade within the line in the morning, but...I think those soldiers got to both her and Ivy by now."

*They...they took Wren?* The Indestructible City had her - why? Why did they want her? *Why did someone have to take her away again?*

Not saying anything for several moments, Grove crossed his arms and exhaled deeply. "I'm going to take a walk," he uttered, not meeting anyone's eyes as he walked off. "And I would appreciate being left alone in the meanwhile."

Now looking concerned, Sky glanced at Leaf. "D-did we say something wrong?"

"I..." Leaf didn't seem to have much of a response. "He has...history with the Indestructible City. It wasn't either of us, don't worry." Leaf's words didn't seem to put either of them at ease, but neither of them dared to continue that discussion. Especially when Grove just ran off *because* of it.

Cranberry looked as if she wanted to stop him from leaving, but said nothing - Rowan couldn't blame her. *I almost forgot about his thing with the Indestructible City.* Rowan knew Grove had a major distaste for the city, but she had never truly understood why. Until now. *What are they doing to her? She might have lived on her own for years, but she's still only fourteen. And she's still my little sister.* She didn't get why they wanted her. Why they wanted to capture the others.

*It isn't fair.*

Bluebell scowled, though Rowan could detect at least a hint of fear from her. "What does that stupid place even want with her? She's younger than *me*, and they should have no problem defending themselves."

*Bluebell's right, but...somehow I don't think they took Wren just because they need help defending themselves. That'd be incredibly stupid, anyways.* Rowan wasn't going to say that out loud, however - tensions were running high and snark probably wasn't going to be appreciated.

"Quit saying stupid crap, Bluebell," Camellia called from over her shoulder. Her voice sounded gruff, as well as tired - Rowan guessed it was from earlier. She was laying back down, her back facing everyone. "Wren's friends with a *dragon*. I find it hard to believe that absolutely no one's seen her with him before."

Glaring at Camellia, Bluebell crossed her arms. "Why don't *you* stop saying stupid crap? How would anyone from Talisman get to the Indestructible City that quickly? Besides, no one from there would even leave the place!"

"Hey, *hey*. Both of you, knock it off," Cranberry said, raising her voice ever so slightly. "But as much as I hate to admit it, Camellia might be right about that. It doesn't help that I've never seen a dragon have scales like Sky's before - but I'm not sure if anyone in Talisman would go out of the village, what with their fear of dragons." Her gaze flickered back to Leaf. "Leaf, do you have any ideas?"

"Erm, yeah, actually..." Leaf spoke up, casting a nervous look at Bluebell. "Wren and Ivy took Sky into Valor to dethrone the Dragonslayer, and well...I wouldn't be surprised if one of the guards he hired ended up running off to the Indestructible City."

*They*...what*?* Rowan wasn't exactly sure how to react to that - all she really knew about the Dragonslayer was from Grove. From what she knew, he was supposed to be a hero. *Was...that just a lie, then?* She wanted to ask Grove and Leaf for extra confirmation, but she didn't want to interrupt either of them for something like that - not to mention, her head was already hurting enough on its own.

Camellia peered over her shoulder to glower Bluebell in reply. "Told you so." Bluebell just bit her tongue, quietly grumbling.

Sighing at the two of them, Cranberry just shook her head. "Thank you for telling us, Leaf. I promise that we'll figure something out, alright? We want to get Wren and Ivy back safely as much as you and Sky do."

Leaf stood up, giving her a slight nod of acknowledgement. "Alright." He glanced over at Sky, who looked lost in thought. "Sky? We're probably going to be staying for a while."

"I don't mind," Sky said softly. Even Rowan could tell he sounded genuinely upset, as awful as she was at reading dragon expressions. "As long as we get Wren and Ivy back."

"Me too," Leaf replied absentmindedly. "We're going to find somewhere to sleep for the night. I don't think it's the safest option for the both of us to stick around so close to camp." As he left, he didn't look back once. "'Night."

Rowan felt a pang in her chest. *Moons, he's going to be taking the brunt of this...* Leaf was probably over the three moons with joy when he reunited with Wren. He seemed so happy to be around her when Rowan last saw them. *He didn't deserve to have that taken away from him, especially not so soon.* She wished she could give him some words of assurance that they would bring back Wren, but she wasn't all that sure if they could herself. *The only thing we* can *do at the moment is hope she's okay.*

Once Leaf and Sky were out of earshot, Bluebell let out a violent hiss - or at least, a noise that resembled one. "I *hate* that stupid city! If they do anything to hurt my little sister, then I'll...I'll punch their lord's stupid face!"

"Bluebell, cool it." Rowan was shocked to see that it was Camellia speaking - Camellia looked as if she was struggling to hold back her anger, however. *A better job than Bluebell, which is...impressive, to say the least.* "We can't *do* anything about it right now, so save it for tomorrow. Some of us want to get sleep."

A scoff sounded from Bluebell's lips. "Of course *you* would say that. Unlike a *certain someone in camp*, I'm too concerned about what that place might do to Wren than getting beauty sleep!" With a slight curl of her lips, Bluebell narrowed her eyes. "So apologies if I'm a *little* over the edge right now."

Camellia flinched slightly, but her gaze didn't waver. "Quit twisting my words and use your brain for once. You *know* what I meant." *I can't say I disagree with her entirely, but...seriously? Doesn't she realise how much trouble she's asking for by constantly insulting Bluebell?*

"How can anyone know what you mean when all you do is scream at others for the stupidest reasons?" Bluebell snapped, throwing her hands in the air. "For all I know, you just want everyone to ignore what happened to Wren just because you're selfish! It's not like you seem to care for anyone here besides Mallow, so you can't even deny *that*."

"Just shut up," Camellia muttered through gritted teeth. "You're aggravating to listen to."

Before Bluebell could shoot another retort at Camellia, Cranberry cleared her throat. "We are going to discuss this in the morning and there's not going to be personal attacks involved, *period*. So the both of you, for the last time, *shut up*."

The two fell silent, though not without sharing a long, hostile stare. *This is the closest to shutting up these two will get while fighting...* Rowan would be lying if she said she wasn't relieved it was Cranberry who told the two to shut it instead of herself. *I doubt either of them would've listened to me, anyways.*

Bluebell stopped glaring first, beginning to storm off. "Fine! But leave me alone until then." Without waiting for a response, Bluebell took off deeper into the forest. *Bluebell?*

They waited to see if Bluebell would come back for a few seconds - those seconds soon turned into several minutes. *Oh, she's* really *pissed this time.* Eventually Tadpole got to his feet, albeit shakily. He shot Camellia an angry glare - or at least, as angry as Tadpole could look. Camellia just returned it with a similar gesture, with an equal amount venom if not more. Or at least, enough to make Tadpole to turn away from her.

"I-I'm going to make sure Bluebell's alright," he mumbled, already headed off before finishing his sentence. *I'm still not sure how to feel about him, but...I'm glad he seems to care about her.*

Camellia bit her lip, glancing over at Mallow. "Mallow?" Rowan raised an eyebrow. Though Camellia talking to Mallow wasn't out of the ordinary, Rowan had never seen her look so...uncertain about what she was about to ask. *This might be interesting.*

Mallow, who seemed a bit more calm now that Sky was gone, barely turned to face her. "Yeah?"

"You...you don't agree with her, do you?"

Rowan froze upon hearing the question. She had a guess - well, no. A solid idea of what was bringing on this question. *She's still upset over what I said.* Camellia had made an effort to lash out at Rowan more since that fight, though sometimes she just gave Rowan the

cold shoulder. *And really, I still deserve it. Even though she can be unbearable, I wouldn't want to hurt her on purpose.* It just stung all the more now knowing that Camellia lashing out at Rowan or ignoring her was the only way Camellia was apparently willing to show Rowan that she was still angry.

Grimacing, Mallow just avoided meeting Camellia's eyes, not saying a single word. *So even if they're some of the closest among us, Mallow still can't deny that Camellia is...too much at times.* What with how close the two were, Rowan thought that would mean Mallow at least understood Camellia better than the rest of them. Camellia narrowed her eyes, holding back tears.

"Of course," Camellia muttered bitterly. She whipped around towards the opposite direction Bluebell went. "If I don't come back by midnight, then give my shelter to someone else."

With that, she stormed off. Mallow's expression morphed into one of worry and guilt. Thyme had a conflicted look on his face, while Cranberry just grimaced. Rowan could only stare in the direction Camellia ran off in - it was happening again. Her siblings were falling apart, and all she could do was watch. *Well, not really...I should be doing more. I could've told them to stop, or make a bigger effort to help them get along.*

*And instead I just let them tear one another apart. I didn't stop them when Wren got sacrificed, I couldn't do it now...*

"Rowan?" Cranberry asked, tilting her head. "Are you alright?"

'*Are you alright?' What kind of question is that? My family's falling apart again, and it's all my fault for never making an effort to keep us together...* As Rowan sat there in complete silence, she felt a few tears streaming down her face. Almost instantly she heard Cranberry bounding over to her, practically crashing into her shoulder. Rowan tensed up upon contact, but forced her muscles to relax. Soon, she spotted Thyme and Mallow now sitting nearby her from the corner of her eyes. *Why do they keep trying to comfort me about these things when it's obviously my fault?* Now she couldn't stop herself from sniveling - though she really didn't care that much.

Cranberry gently leaned into Rowan, part of her chin resting atop Rowan's head. "Aw, Rowan, please don't cry."

"How do you expect me to react?" Rowan snapped, though it was more of a choked up sob. "It's my fault for this happening. I couldn't stop them from breaking apart when Wren got sacrificed, and I can't do it now...I didn't even try this time."

Thyme gave her a nudge. "Hey, *hey*. It is *not* your fault that Bluebell and Camellia keep jumping down each other's throats."

Rowan let out another sniff, glaring at him. "I should know how to keep them from fighting, though! And I just watched, instead of trying to resolve it." Thyme flinched at her tone, but didn't budge - Rowan had to push down her guilt.

"Rowan, I know Camellia better than most people here - I can tell you that it would've been almost impossible to stop that fight from happening," Mallow murmured. "Trust me, I've tried and failed. It isn't your fault for being unable to stop the inevitable."

"Just shut up, it *is* my fault," Rowan exhaled, her voice choked up and shaky. She got up, walking over to the shelter she, Cranberry, and Grove typically shared - it was difficult to ignore the pleas of the others, and the guilt that was sitting like a boulder in her stomach. She swallowed it back down and kept walking. "I'm going to bed. Goodnight."

...

Rowan woke up with a jolt, her body quivering as she sat up. It wasn't a nightmare, per say, but...she wished it was just that. A nightmare. She sighed as she glanced down at her hands, which had been drenched in her own snot and tears several minutes earlier. If everything that was going wrong was just a nightmare, Rowan wouldn't have been crying herself to sleep. She wouldn't have felt as terrified and disgusted with herself. And she wouldn't be worried sick over her youngest siblings. *I'm the oldest of the six of us. I shouldn't be sobbing over this.*

Well, she was *trying* to tell herself that she would put on a better

mask for her siblings, but honestly it just made her feel all the more worse.

She turned her gaze over to Cranberry, who was sleeping next to her - it didn't look to be a particularly peaceful sleep, however. *I guess I'm at fault for that, too.* Rowan clenched her fists as she exhaled as deeply and as softly as she could, without waking Cranberry up. *Cranberry's had a long day because of my stupidity. She needs the sleep.*

*But I'm probably not going to be able to go back to sleep that easily.*

Being careful not to wake Cranberry up, Rowan left the shelter. *I could just...take a short walk in the meanwhile. Maybe that'll help?* She doubted it, but...at this point, it'd be better than just laying down and *wishing* she was asleep. As soon as she left, the first thing that caught her eye was the lit fire - soon after, she noticed Grove tending to the fire. *He's feeling better from earlier? Hopefully...* From across him was Bluebell, who was simply fiddling with her fingers. Tadpole was also with her, who was fast asleep on her shoulder. The fact that Tadpole already seemed so comfortable with Bluebell made Rowan question the nature of their relationship, but...it wasn't really any of her concern. *Is everyone else asleep, then?*

Grove took notice of her first. "Rowan, you're up," he greeted her, though his voice sounded a bit croaky. "I...I heard about what happened with the others. You feeling any better since?"

*No.* Grove would probably pester her even more with that response, though. She shrugged. "I guess." She took another glance over his face - he looked *exhausted*. It didn't help that Rowan could see the dried up tears marking his cheeks. "I'm more concerned about you, anyways."

"Sorry about storming off like that," he sighed, his shoulders sagging.

Rowan shook her head, surprised *Grove* of all people was apologising for that. Didn't he get on her case for apologising for things that, according to him, weren't her fault? "You needed the time to yourself. Don't apologise for it, alright? I know the

Indestructible City is a touchy subject for you."

Grove gave her a small smile, though unconvinced. "If you say so. I'm feeling a bit better now, so try not to worry too much." *You obviously aren't, but you don't have to keep talking about it right now.* Rowan would just try again at a different time.

She glanced over at Bluebell, who had been watching their conversation with mild interest. Upon realising Rowan had noticed her, Bluebell grimaced, her expression full of guilt.

"R-Rowan? I'm really sorry about earlier as well," she stammered, sounding the most quiet Rowan had ever heard her. "I still think that Camellia kind of deserved it, but...I also feel really awful about saying those things to her. I mean, I normally keep those thoughts to myself and I'm open about not liking Camellia, so I *shouldn't* have a problem with calling her out like that. But now I'm just upset and feel horrible."

"It's alright, today was just...not the best day for any of us," Rowan exhaled, blinking a few times to get the ash out of her eyes, as well as to keep herself from crying. "I know Camellia can be...a handful, to say the least. You aren't the only one who's said some things to her and felt guilty over it, so just don't beat yourself over it, alright?" *You should seriously consider apologising to her at some point, though. And I really need to do that, as well...* "Speaking of Camellia, where is she? I need to talk with her, anyways."

Grove cast a glance over his shoulder, then frowned. "She hasn't come back since she left. I'm sure she's capable of taking care of herself, but...I'm worried about her."

*She's still not back? I thought she would've cooled down by now but...* Rowan immediately shook off that thought. *No, no she wouldn't. She's still upset over what I said, and Bluebell and Mallow just made it worse...I'd be surprised if she came back sooner than midnight.*

Moons, that realisation just made Rowan feel *worse* about her whole comment about Camellia. *I'm such an awful sister.*

"That's...really worrying, even if it's expected." Rowan's gaze

scanned the camp until she spotted her sword - she hadn't needed it for a while, but she knew that she would've felt better if she had it on her. She grabbed it and slung the strap over her shoulder. "I'll go look for her."

...

Rowan hadn't been looking for too long before a pinecone hit her directly on the head. She jumped, startled - it wasn't too big, but it was enough to give Rowan a headache. *Moons, Camellia better be out here or else...* Annoyed, Rowan picked up the pinecone and chucked it at one of the tree trunks. *I did not come out here looking to get a headache.*

She glanced up at the branches - a pinecone wouldn't have just fallen like that. *Something, or...someone would've had to do something that would make it fall.* The branches went still for a moment, and Rowan could only hear the whistling breeze that faded in and out. *Suspicious, if anything.* It was probably Camellia, Rowan guessed - while Camellia was arguably the better climber between her and Rowan, it didn't mean her hiding skills in trees were worth much. *I'm going to have to climb, aren't I?* With a begrudging groan, Rowan made her way up the tree, desperately trying to keep her gaze averted from the ground.

Without too much difficulty, Rowan had reached the first larger branch she could sit on. She scanned the area, her eyes narrowed. "Camellia? Camellia, I know you're here."

"Rowan, just shut up and leave me alone," Camellia hissed from up above. "I don't want to hear about how you all hate me. I got the hint!"

Rowan had to fight back her tears. "That's not- I didn't come here to antagonise you!"

Camellia didn't seem to respond at first - until Rowan felt a stick tap her shoulder. *She...she just threw a stick at me!* "You didn't deny that you hate me, so go away!"

Tearing off a bit of the branch, Rowan chucked a stick back at her.

Camellia yelped, much to Rowan's equal guilt and satisfaction. "Camellia, I don't hate you!"

"Oh, pipe down! You *just* threw a stick at me!"

"Only because you threw one first, you hypocrite!" Rowan retorted. Camellia just scoffed. "Listen, I'm not leaving you out here on your own. As much as you seem to think otherwise, I *do* care about you."

Camellia let out something of a growl. "No, you don't. Apparently I'm just as bad as Mushroom, so why do you care?"

*No, you're not-!* Rowan flinched, Camellia's words sinking in. *I should never have said that.* "C-Camellia, I didn't mean-"

"Don't '*C-C-Camellia'* me! You know damn well what you meant!" she spat - from what Rowan could hear, she snapped a few twigs in rage. "Quit trying to convince me otherwise. I'm tired of it."

A tear managed to wriggle its way out of Rowan's eyes, despite constantly rubbing her tears away. "Camellia, *please*." She sighed shakily, letting out more sniffs than she would've liked - more tears began to run down her cheeks. "I'm really sorry about that. I wasn't thinking and it just..." Rowan trailed off, not wanting to finish the sentence. *Why am I trying to excuse it? I shouldn't have said it and Camellia wouldn't care about that, anyways.*

Camellia hadn't said anything for a couple of minutes - Rowan was almost sure that her outburst had caused Camellia to get further away from her. *Not that I can blame her. That was an awful apology, even from me...and I'd deserve it if she refused to talk to me ever again because of this.* After a few more seconds of awkward silence dragged on, Rowan overheard the crunching of twigs and leaves drawing closer towards her, until Camellia gently placed herself onto Rowan's branch. *Camellia didn't...climb higher?*

Tilting her head slightly, Camellia had a flurry of emotions on her face - confusion, surprise, anger, and guilt, all blending into her expression. "Rowan, you're...crying."

"Brilliant observation there," Rowan replied dryly, rolling her eyes

slightly. She still had tears pouring out of her eyes, but she was making an attempt to keep them at bay, now that Camellia was in front of her. "Want to comment on anything else that's obvious?" She knew she really shouldn't be trying to push Camellia's buttons, but she could care less.

Camellia pressed her lips together. "I suppose not." She tried to meet Rowan's eyes for a moment, before looking down at the branch. "That apology was...actually genuine?"

Rowan fought back a sharp retort, letting her shoulders slump. "I was trying to be. Whether you accept it or not is a different story." *And honestly, it was terrible. But I don't think I'll get the chance to try and apologise to her properly after this.* Stepping down a branch or two, Rowan didn't look back up at Camellia. "Anyways, I just wanted to check on you. But you seem to be doing fine, so I'll just go back to camp."

*She isn't really, but...there's only so much I can take.* Once Rowan made it to the base of the tree, she didn't bother checking to see if Camellia was following her. All she really wanted to do now was get back to camp and sleep, entirely too tired to keep the conversation with Camellia going. *Will she even head back to camp?* Rowan...honestly wasn't sure. Between her, Bluebell, and Mallow, Camellia probably wouldn't want to go back, anyways.

...

She had made a far ways back to the camp before she glanced over her shoulder to check - surely enough, someone was following her: Camellia. Camellia seemed worn out and exhausted, and had a fair amount of tearstains on her cloths compared to Rowan. Rowan lightly bit her lip, frowning. *I thought Camellia was going to stay behind.* Camellia stopped in her tracks once she realised Rowan had noticed her.

"What? I want to get sleep too, you know," she muttered, her tone sharp and irate.

Her words couldn't help but cut through Rowan. *Is she mad at me for trying to apologise? Or leaving?* Rowan just darted her eyes away,

forcing herself to take deep breaths. She didn't want to think of all the reasons Camellia would be mad at her - there was too many to list.

*And I never said anything about that, you idiot.* Moons, she *desperately* wanted to say that, but she knew by now that the trouble it'd wasn't worth it.

"I thought you were still angry with everyone and didn't want to head back," Rowan said flatly.

Camellia bit back a groan and sighed. "I am. But I don't want to stay out here on my own." She was quiet for a few seconds before adding, "And you have a sword on you. So I'd be safer with you than by myself."

Rowan almost rolled her eyes. "What makes you think I'd protect you? According to you, I despise your guts. Have some consistency, would you?"

"I..." Camellia didn't speak after that. For the first time, Rowan had gotten Camellia to shut up. "I suppose so."

Rowan's eyes widened. *I can't believe* that *managed to keep her quiet.* She couldn't quite hide her surprise, still doubtful that it had even worked. But it didn't compare to the guilt she was feeling - maybe she shouldn't have said that, either. *At least she isn't screaming insults at me, but...* Rowan wasn't going to dwell on it any longer. She needed sleep, not another fight with Camellia. *Even if it's my fault.*

**10/6/21 edit: after getting some feedback on this chapter, i changed some things around a bit since i agreed with it and felt like this chapter could use some fine-tuning now that i'm finished with chapter 27.**

# Chapter 27: Brook

**BROOK**

"-And that's why I'm hoping to bring Daffodil and Violet with me," Brook finished.

Brook was in her office, with both of Violet's dads and Daffodil's mother sitting across from her. She had been anxious over going into full details, but she had to get it over with at some point. *I couldn't just let them come with me without letting them know, or anything like that. They'd be worried regardless, but they'd be even more worried if I didn't talk to them first.*

Hummingbird, one of Violet's dads, spoke up first. "I understand why you're taking them with, but...are you certain they'll be alright?"

She nodded. "I'm certain. I'll be taking two other experienced Wingwatchers with me, as well as another former Wingwatcher. I can assure you that their safety will be one of our top priorities, speaking as your lord and one parent to another."

Hummingbird seemed somewhat satisfied with that answer, but Brook could tell he was still nervous about letting Violet leave Valor. *Not that I can blame him. I don't think I could handle Forest leaving Valor for a bit - I know I can barely handle what's going on now...* His husband, Birch, took his hand and gave him a slight nod. Birch glanced back at Brook, grimacing.

"I get that, but...Violet and Daffodil both are only fourteen. And Violet, well..." He shifted uncomfortably in his chair, scratching the back of his neck. "You've seen how the Wingwatcher arrests have affected her, surely? I'm just not sure if it's the best to send her off while she's still dealing with the aftermath."

Of all the questions, Brook was surprised it hadn't come up sooner. She was, of course, aware that most members of the Wingwatchers

were dealing with the aftereffects in their own way - she knew that both Foxglove and Holly tried to stay out of their cave just because that's where they got arrested. Squirrel was more protective of both of his younger brothers since (it was likely amplified once Squirrel found out about his parents' death). Brook herself was still struggling to enjoy her duties as lord, and was putting off addressing all of Valor - she couldn't shake off the clear memories of that announcement Heath made, then struggling to fight back against his guards. She could only imagine how much worse it was on the younger recruits.

Brook gave him an understanding nod. "I'm aware. I could check up on her occasionally should she decide to come with, but in the end, I feel that's something for the three of you to discuss."

"Brook, with all due respect, I'm not very sold on the idea of bringing Daffodil, either." It was Petunia, Daffodil's mother and in addition, Petal's younger sister. Brook had never particularly been fond of Petunia, and was dead certain that Petunia didn't like her either, but she was able to tolerate her. *Mainly for Petal's sake, but...* "You know how she is. Are you sure you want to take her with?"

Brook slowly raised an eyebrow at her. "Yes, I'm aware that Daffodil's capable of being on the surface for more than one day. And I also know that she's capable of following my orders." *Most of the time - according to Foxglove, anyways...*

Petunia frowned. "Does she, though? Last I heard, she was trying to sneak out of Valor."

Shrugging, Brook didn't let her expression shift. "That was at least a week ago, and she hasn't tried since. She and Violet both informed me of the situation going on in the first place - so I feel Daffodil has at least some right to go."

"I know that," Petunia replied snippily. *Aaaand there's the snark.* "But doesn't that mean there's a chance that whatever situation is going on could hurt my daughter? She'd *definitely* get herself hurt!"

Birch gave Petunia an odd stare, then nodded slowly. "I wouldn't say it like that, but...I share some of Petunia's sentiments about this.

I know that you wouldn't let any harm come to Violet or Daffodil, but whatever this situation is...well, it isn't making me feel any better about letting them go."

*At least Birch isn't giving me the same tone as Petunia.* "I should tell you that part, shouldn't I?" She had been trying to avoid that subject - she didn't want to risk a mass panic. *But they should know...ugh.*

"*Yes*," Petunia hissed, exasperated.

Brook just narrowed her eyes at Petunia, not saying anything at first. "Please don't share this with anyone else. I really don't need to deal with a mass panic right now."

Hummingbird's eyes widened, his grip on Birch's hand tightening. "T-that...really doesn't help my concern, but...go ahead."

Birch grimaced. "If it's as serious as you make it...well, regardless, you know neither of us would tell."

*Of course I know that. It was more meant for Petunia...* Brook knew well that both Hummingbird and Birch valued the safekeeping of secrets - it wasn't rare for Brook to inform one of them of something that she couldn't tell many people, especially under Heath's rule. *Then again, it isn't like they haven't had to keep secrets of their own...* Brook never particularly pried into the why, since she didn't want to stick her nose into business that wasn't her own. *I mean, I am the lord now, but...it still feels gross to imagine myself doing that. I can't imagine how Heath stomached doing it so often, even though he's...Heath.*

"The short version of it is that my son, Forest, is missing," Brook stated grimly, trying to avoid her voice cracking up. She would *not* let the tears well up in her eyes again, like they always did when she thought about it. "Violet and Daffodil first alerted me of spotting someone leaving the caves, then Moth, Foxglove, and Parsley all confirmed that Forest was nowhere to be found. So I'm going to go looking for him with a small patrol." *I'm not sure how long it'll take, or how long we'll be gone, but...I promise I'm coming for you, Forest.*

Her explanation was greeted with a tense silence at first. Brook couldn't quite meet their gazes as no one said a word, bowing her head down slightly. *It's all my fault. I should've kept a better eye on him, I should've tried to make amends with him sooner...*

*I should've been a better mother.*

She felt a hand hesitantly place itself on her wrist - she looked up to see Hummingbird giving her an empathetic glance.

"Brook, I'm so sorry to hear that. I can see why you didn't let anyone else besides the other Wingwatchers know," he murmured.

*Actually, I let Lark know as well, so...not just Wingwatchers. Unless I count her since she used to be one?* "Thanks," she sighed, upon realising that he was awaiting a response. "It's been the main thing on my mind as of late."

Petunia's expression was one of anxiety and concern. "I can tell. But do you really think that sending two kids the same age as your son will benefit you? I mean, what if Daffodil goes missing like Forest? I'd rather my daughter stay here in Valor than possibly get kidnapped!"

"I promise you, I won't let that happen," Brook said, not bothering to hide the frustration within her assertive tone. "I wouldn't take them with me if I had any doubts about that."

Petunia seemed taken aback by Brook's response - but she sighed, seemingly giving up. "Considering your stubbornness about taking them, I guess I shouldn't be surprised if you do keep that promise."

*Obviously.* Brook wasn't going to start sniping at Petunia now - not only was it not worth it, but it would probably be considered unprofessional. *Ugh. I hate having to act professional.*

"Thank you, Petunia," Brook replied, forcing herself to keep any further frustration out of her voice. "Well, I assume we're all in agreement, or at least have a common understanding. I'll ask Daffodil and Violet if they're up for the trip in a bit."

Shortly after, Birch, Hummingbird, and Petunia left Brook's office,

leaving Brook by herself. Slumping down in her chair, she let out a deep sigh of relief. *It's over with. I managed to convince them.* She was honestly still in disbelief - she was almost certain that Petunia would've been difficult and decide to keep Daffodil in Valor regardless of what Brook said. *Maybe she's starting to tolerate me more since I'm the lord? I mean, it's not like she can't purposefully disregard what I say now, whether it's because she doesn't believe me about Daffodil or it's...because of Petal.*

Brook didn't particularly want to think about how everything became so much worse when Petal died, however - it hurt, and it made her unable to think about anything else for the next couple of days. *I should be over it...I'm not the only one who's lost people because of Heath, and it's been a little over a decade since she passed...* Brook forced the lump in her throat down and stood up, leaving her office. As she opened the door, she noticed Lark standing right outside. It almost caused Brook to let out an exclamation of surprise, but she buried it as well as she could - she was *not* going to practically hand another opportunity to Lark to tease her.

"How'd it go?" she asked, breaking the silence.

Brook shrugged, glancing in the direction of her cave's exit. "Better than I thought, I'll say that much."

Lark seemed confused for a moment, then quietly mumbled, "Ohh. Petunia."

With a grunt, Brook crossed her arms. "I'm guessing she's realised that she can't disregard what I have to say about Daffodil all the time." *Or because she's just accepting the fact that I couldn't stop Petal's death...which I can't blame her for.* Brook wasn't going to say that out loud, however - she knew that Lark probably wouldn't like the whole situation with Petal being brought up to her again. "Onto lighter news...how's your side of things going?"

Frowning, Lark's gaze drifted to the cave ceiling. "Could be better. I thought of asking one of the older Wingwatchers since they've probably had a decent amount of experience, but...well, I'd feel better if you were with me."

"Why's that?" Brook asked, raising an eyebrow. "I know it's been a while since you've talked to some of them, but I doubt they're holding it against you."

Lark uncomfortably adjusted her scarf, now blatantly refusing to meet Brook's gaze. "You know how I left the Wingwatchers, Brook...you *really* think any of them want to speak to me after that?"

*Ah, right. That incident.* Brook almost wanted to slap herself for letting that slip from her mind - Lark probably was avoiding most of the Wingwatchers their age *still* for that reason. The only reason Brook had remembered the event so vividly was due to the strain it had on Brook's relationship with Lark. Honestly, it could even be considered one of the major things that caused Brook and Lark's falling out. *I really wish I tried harder to stop her from quitting, but...she probably- no, she definitely wouldn't have listened to me, anyways.*

"Alright, I understand," Brook answered, her voice soft. "I can go with you to talk to them if it makes you feel better."

Smiling, Lark brightened up, just a little. "Thanks."

Brook gave her a curt nod. "No problem. We should go as soon as possible - I don't think I assigned all of the older Wingwatchers to surface patrols, so I doubt we'll have to leave Valor yet."

...

As Brook and Lark approached one of the tunnels, Brook scanned the area to see if any of the older Wingwatchers were around. Most of the Wingwatchers who were considered 'old' were typically around their early to late twenties - which honestly bugged Brook immensely, but it wasn't like she could magically change how every new batch of apprentices saw their superiors. *Moons, they probably think of me as ancient...but whatever. They'll be considered old at some point and they'll have to deal with the apprentices in the future...*

However, there *were* still some Wingwatchers who were around Brook's age who hadn't retired yet. Not as many as Brook wished

there were, but she tried to avoid dwelling on that. *Besides, at least half of the Wingwatchers who were apprentices with me didn't have a choice in retiring...* She tried to avoid thinking about that, too. It often just made her miserable and angry with Heath.

There were a few Wingwatchers around, working with a few others who seemed to be volunteers. They appeared to be working on the tunnels, which Brook guessed was one of the lesser damaged ones from Ivy's friend and her dragon. Soon enough, Brook spotted one of the older ones, who seemed to be overseeing the project - Feather. Their gaze was focused on the papers in their hands, while occasionally looking up to check on how the others. Just as they were about to move onto the next section of the tunnel, Brook rushed to catch up with them.

"Feather!"

The Wingwatcher turned to face her, surprised. Feather grinned once they saw Brook. "Hey, Brookie!"

Brook desperately tried to ignore the amused looks the others - and Lark, once she glanced back at her - were giving her. "Feather, seriously?"

Feather let out a snort of laughter. "Aw, come on! I've always called you that!"

"I know, but in front of them?" Brook groaned - though it was more of a pathetic whine, if anything. Lark, who was now standing next to Brook, was stifling a fit of laughter. "You aren't helping!"

"Oh, you're never any fun," Feather huffed, rolling their eyes. Turning to Lark, their smile remained on their face. "Lark! I didn't expect to see you today."

Lark seemed a bit startled, her laughter stopping in an instant. "O-oh, Feather. Yeah, I...didn't expect to see you either." *Well, that's a half lie and we both know it.*

Tilting their head at her, Feather frowned. "What's wrong?" They remained quiet for a few seconds, before glancing back up at Lark

and Brook. "Oh, you aren't still beating yourself up over *that*, are you?"

"I...maybe," Lark sighed, pursing her lips. She shivered a little, brushing out the wrinkles in her sweater. "But that's not why we're here."

Raising an eyebrow, Feather smirked. "You two are a 'we' now, huh?"

Lightly punching Feather's shoulder, Brook rolled her eyes. "Stay focused for a minute, will you?"

Feather crossed their arms, shrugging. "I can't promise too much, but I'll try." They looked over Lark's expression for a brief moment. "Looks pretty serious, so I probably should make an effort."

*You've obviously never changed that much since I took over for Commander Sparrow...* Feather was generally like this when it came to work - while Brook could *sometimes* get Feather to focus on something for the day, they often ended up multitasking halfway through the task. *Honestly, reminds me of Daffodil. Maybe I should have Feather work with Daffodil from time to time, probably with Violet as well since I know those two are practically inseparable. Might benefit them both.*

"Well, I appreciate the effort," Brook sighed. Feather chuckled softly for a bit, before quieting down. Brook glanced at Lark. "Did you want me to say it?"

Lark opened her mouth - nothing came out at first. She then shook her head. "N-no, I think I can handle it."

*You don't sound like it...* Brook decided to keep her mouth shut, however. *That'd probably just make her even more nervous...and she'd probably get mad with me for it.*

"I'll be waiting when you're ready," Feather mumbled, their gaze slightly drifting over to the other Wingwatchers. Mildly annoyed, Brook cleared her throat, grabbing their attention. "Sorry, sorry!"

Lark shared a brief look with Brook before directing her attention

back to Feather. "I don't know if Brook told you already, but she's going to be headed out for a while."

They tilted their head, somewhat bewildered. "Like, 'going out to check something for a few days' a while or the 'going out on an expedition to the rainforest for at least a week' kind? You gotta be specific."

Brook narrowed her eyes at them. "Where's that coming from? I've never led any expeditions there." *Of all the places, too...not even Sparrow would've risked that, even before the dragon attack! We avoid going there for a reason...* Brook wasn't going to tell that to Feather, however - she was sure Feather had an inkling as to *what* Brook wanted to say, anyhow.

Feather cast a sly grin at Brook. "Perhaps I've started to develop an interest in exploring that part of Pyrrhia." *Yeah, you would, you thrill-seeker...* They crossed their arms. "So...my question?"

"Oh, uh..." Lark lightly nudged Brook's shoulder. She leaned in a bit, whispering, "How long do you think we might be gone?"

*I...don't know.* All Brook knew for certain was that she *would* find her son, no matter what. Even if it meant having to take matters into her own hands. *We don't even have many clues as to where he is. We might be searching for a while.* Moons, she wished she'd thought this plan through with Lark more than they had initially. *Well, I can't take back what I said earlier.*

She grimaced. "I can't say for certain. Maybe half a week, at the very least."

Lark's eyes widened in both shock and frustration (which Brook honestly couldn't entirely blame her for), but she didn't argue. "For a while," she continued, a slight strain to her voice.

Feather was quiet for a moment then hummed to themself. "I *can* hear you, but never mind that. That's fine, but you're the lord of Valor now, Brook. Are you seriously just going to take off again like when you went to the old village?"

Scowling at them, Brook didn't bother hiding any hint of annoyance or offense. "Like you have the right to talk about that." Feather quickly picked up on it, simply returning Brook's glare with an evenly matched expression of indifference.

"Brook, I already know that you have good reasons for going out, but can you *please* not immediately take offense when someone asks you why?" Lark sighed, exasperated.

Brook just glanced between Lark and Feather before letting out a begrudging groan, crossing her arms. No, Lark, Brook was perfectly within her right to be irritated with Feather's moronic questions when her main concern was her *missing son*. She wasn't going to say anything, though. *I don't want to risk Lark getting too frustrated with me to want to speak to me again.*

Feather placed a hand on their hip, frowning slightly. "And if this about...well, you know who...Brook, we've tried-"

"*Don't*," Brook growled, narrowing her eyes. "I'm finding him if no one else can." *I refuse to give up my son.*

Just sucking in their breath, Feather glanced over at Lark. "Well? Do you at least have some idea on how you're going to handle this? Because I assume Brook's going to run off anyways."

*Run off? How is going to find my son 'running off'?* She settled for silently fuming instead of lashing out at Feather - she'd been sending out patrols for *days*. Hoping that one of them would bring back any news about Forest. The other Wingwatchers were getting tired of Brook still trying. She didn't know if he was even alive still. *I bet Feather just wants to tell me to get over Forest already like I did with Petal,* she mused, glowering Feather. *Well, she can go kick rocks. I still haven't gotten over Petal.*

"O-oh, well...I was wondering if you or one of the other older Wingwatchers could take over for Brook while we're out," Lark explained, her voice beginning to waver.

Feather just glared at Brook for a moment, then shrugged in a passive-aggressive manner. "Yes, I suppose the other Wingwatchers

could do Brook's job for her for a couple of days."

Brook almost flinched at Feather's glare and words - she wasn't sure if it was supposed to be a 'Moons she's just as bad as Heath' comparison or a 'Commander Sparrow knew how to lead the Wingwatchers better' kind, but she hated it either way. She just wanted to scream at Feather for it, but she knew Lark, the other Wingwatchers, and civilians were watching - she couldn't show her anger right now. *Am I really that bad of a lord?*

Lark cleared her throat. "Well, anyways...thank you. I'll talk to the others later." She lightly nudged Brook's shoulder. "Come on, Brook. We have other things to do before leaving."

*I* know *that.* Brook didn't argue, however - she honestly just didn't want to be around Feather any longer. She trailed after Lark, though not without shooting one last dagger at Feather. Feather just rolled their eyes and went back to work. Once she caught up to Lark, Brook just quietly sighed.

"Hey, Brook," Lark spoke up. Brook tiredly glanced at her. Was she just going to go off on how Brook was being 'disrespectful' and 'unreasonable'? *Moons, probably.* "Did you want to take a break while I talk to the other Wingwatchers?"

*Of course she- huh?* That was...not what Brook expected. "I, uh. Yeah. That'd be great, actually."

Lark tilted her head at her, mildly confused. "What, were you expecting me to say something else? Because there's a bunch of things I *do* want to tell you right now, but you really don't look like you're in the mood to hear them."

Brook blinked at her in surprise. "Seriously? No reprimanding for getting mad at Feather?"

"I mean, you could've handled that a lot better," Lark clarified, slightly hesitant. "But I can't blame you for being upset. Don't let Feather's words get to you, okay? I know you're stressed."

More relieved than she wanted to admit, Brook nodded. "T-thank

you, Lark. I already informed the other Wingwatchers who will be coming with us about this whole thing, so you don't need to handle that, in case if you were thinking of talking to any of them."

Lark gave Brook a small smile. "I'll keep that in mind, then. Should we meet back up at your place later?"

"...Yeah, we can," Brook replied. "But are you sure about going on your own? I know you were nervous about talking to the other Wingwatchers."

Lark nodded. "I still am, but...I don't imagine my conversations with them will take as long. And besides, it probably would work out better if it's just me, since...well, the others might feel similarly to Feather."

*I didn't even think of that. She's probably right, and I hate that.* Brook sighed, folding her arms. "Makes sense. Just don't push yourself too much, alright? I know you're doing this for my sake."

"I can't make any promises, but I'll try," Lark said, grimacing. She glanced around the tunnels briefly before looking back at Brook. "Well, I guess I'll see you later."

Brook waved goodbye back, heading off in the opposite direction that Feather had been in. *Hopefully Lark doesn't have too much difficulty handling the others...I really don't want her to get all stressed over it.*

...

Brook's walk around the streets of Valor had eventually led her to the market, which was often the place she encountered Lark the most outside of work in the past few years. It wasn't her favourite place to be, as it was generally crowded at the time Brook preferred to go out, but it was better than getting talked down to about why she's such a terrible lord and commander from her fellow Wingwatchers.

*I really want to believe I'm overthinking this, but...it just feels like they're right.* Brook shoved her hands into her pockets. *I still don't get why*

*Ivy thought I'd be a good lord. Just because I'm the commander, it doesn't mean I'd be good at having the whole city's livelihood on my back.* It just felt like Brook was only tolerated or liked as the lord if only because Heath was no longer the lord.

She wished that she could just shrug off the thoughts - now that she was on her lonesome, it was even more difficult to ignore them. *Maybe I should've just declined Lark's offer?* She shook that idea away almost as soon as it came to her. *No, I doubt she'd enjoy seeing me like that.* Brook really wished that she could've stuck with Lark without having to deal with the other Wingwatchers, though. *I'm...honestly still kind of peeved about that fight we had, but she's one of the few people who won't immediately get mad at me over this.*

As she scanned the people walking throughout the streets, someone in particular caught her eye - Heath. She couldn't see much from the outside of the cave, but she *could* make out Heath in the dim lighting, and could hear shouting. *Moons, did he start another fight with someone?* She wished she could've been more surprised, but she only felt more exhausted. *It's like he does this on purpose.* Brook slowly made her way in, making sure her presence wasn't too noticeable.

"Heath, just go," the shopkeeper groaned, sounding just as exhausted as Brook was. "I don't have the patience to deal with you right now."

Glancing around, Brook quickly realised whose shop this was. It used to belong to Squirrel's parents, but...it wasn't like they could run it any more. *I wish there was more I could do to help Squirrel and his brothers, but I doubt they want that.* Since Fig and Oleander were banished, it had been put under the care of Lacewing, Squirrel's older cousin. Brook wasn't sure how well the store was doing, but she guessed Lacewing was doing something right to still have it running for the past few years.

"But you're one of the few who at least is willing to speak to me!" Heath protested. "And if I don't get anything, Lark's never going to shut up about it!"

Lacewing sucked in his breath. "Well, that's not really my problem,

now is it?" Tapping his fingers on the counter, he glanced away. "And you still owe me, so forgive me if I don't exactly want to bother with you until you solve that little problem first."

*Is he talking in terms of money, or about Fig and Oleander's deaths?* she wondered for a brief moment, before shaking it off. *...Actually, it's probably both. Not that I blame him. Heath really should make an effort to patch things up with that family.*

"Oh, of course you say that too!" Heath growled, muttering curses to himself. "I was the lord of Valor! I shouldn't have to pay you anything!"

Lacewing slowly raised an eyebrow at him. "*Was*."

Heath slammed his fist on the counter, startling Lacewing. "I could *strangle* you right now."

"Just leave my shop," Lacewing managed to squeak out, backing up. "I probably don't have what you want, anyways."

Heath didn't back down for a few moments, still glowering Lacewing intensely. He whirled around to leave, stopping suddenly when he spotted Brook. She just slowly raised an eyebrow at him, her eyes narrow.

"Don't you have any decency?" he snapped.

Brook's expression didn't falter. "I overheard you threatening someone from the streets, Heath. Lord or not, considering everything you've done, I feel that I have every right to check on the situation."

He threw his hands in the air. "I was just shopping!"

*If threatening someone counts as shopping, then sure.* Brook simply titled her head instead of pressing it. He knew damn well what he was just doing, anyways. "With what money?"

"Stop reminding me," he hissed. "Shouldn't you be doing your important lord duties?"

"I am," she replied simply. *I mean, am I wrong? Someone probably had to interfere with this before Heath lost it...* "And now that you say that, you just reminded me of one I've been needing to do for a while. Come with me."

As Brook turned away to leave the shop, she glanced over her shoulder to see Heath glaring at her from behind. She shot him an equally dirty look back.

"That wasn't a request, idiot," she stated, keeping her voice even despite the contempt beginning to slip into it. Heath didn't seem particularly fazed by her words, but begrudingly obliged.

Once they both left, Heath spoke up first. "What did you want? To get me out of Lacewing's shop?"

Brook rolled her eyes. "Well, considering the fact that you were harassing him...and that it is related, sure. You could say that." She crossed her arms, sighing. "I wanted to remind you that I can easily change my mind about letting you stay in Valor as a regular citizen until I finally finish fixing the majority of the shit you did. I don't want to hurt your daughter and wife, but...as it stands, you've given me no reason as to why I should keep you here. Our encounter in Lacewing's shop proved it." *Well, it wasn't the only thing, but...I feel like mentioning more will be too much for him.*

Heath's gaze widened in shock of the news at first, before immediately glaring at Brook. "You're lying."

She shook her head. "Heath, you know I'm being serious. You need to cut the crap if you really want to stay. I'm tired of hearing from my Wingwatchers that you caused another scene, or another word from Lark about how you proceeded to take your frustration out on her." In between her brief pause, she added, "You're very lucky that I didn't just kick you out of here as soon as I became the lord."

"I- *what*-?" Heath began, before groaning angrily. "This isn't fair at all! I'm not getting banished, especially by you, of all people!"

Brook shrugged nonchalantly, though she could feel her own pent up frustration steadily rising. "Okay then. Start trying to make up

for what you did to everyone in Valor instead of moping about how you got stripped of your title as lord."

"And how would you suggest I do *that*?"

*How is it not obvious, you stupid piece of-* "I could suggest that you start learning basic decency and common sense, for starters."

Heath glowered her. "How *dare* you-"

"Brook!"

Perking up at the sound of her name, Brook turned to see Lark running over to her. Upon reaching her, Lark seemed to be trying her best to ignore Heath.

"Something up?" Brook asked. She looked over Lark's expression - Lark didn't exactly look the most thrilled, but didn't seem angry. *That's probably for the best right now, especially considering Heath's here.*

Lark frowned. "I was waiting for you back at your place."

Brook blinked. "Oh. Sorry about that, it's just..." She gave Heath a pointed glance. He glared right back. "Something needed handling. But enough about that. What did the others say?"

"I'm not entirely sure if they're more annoyed than Feather or less," Lark admitted, sounding hesitant. "But they agreed to it, as long as we - well, mainly just you - aren't gone for too long."

Heath perked up slightly. "Oh, are you leaving?"

Brook narrowed her eyes at him. "Don't even think about trying while I'm gone. I'll have you rotting in prison if you even attempt." *Does he really think that I'd just let him try and take advantage of my absence like that? Or the other Wingwatchers, even? Moons, this idiot...*

"It was just a question," he stated, his tone passive-aggressive. Brook could tell by the undertones in his voice and the look in his eyes that curiosity clearly wasn't the reason - but she didn't want to start a fight with him. *Not in public or in front of Lark, at least.*

Brook instead settled for a harsh glare, directly meeting his gaze. "Then perhaps you'll get an answer to that later today." Heath didn't waiver as she kept glowering him.

Lark looked equally put off by Heath's question, but tried to pay him no mind. "A-anyways, we can start getting ready now, if you want. I don't know when you want to leave, but..."

"We can head out when it's darker out," Brook decided. "It'll be the least noticeable time to leave." *I may not like how Chipmunk managed to make sure every single watch he took was at night, but I won't deny that his little work-around to his training had some sense to it.*

Lark opened her mouth for a few moments, then shut it, after taking a quick look around. "I should discuss this more with you in a more private setting, actually." She glanced at Heath. "Heath, I thought I told you to go get the vegetables."

Heath crossed his arms, glaring at her. "I knew that! But how do you expect me to do that when no one's going to speak to me?"

*He could just steal them, like he did with that sand dragon treasure. He's done it once, he could certainly do it again.* Brook decided that she wouldn't mock Heath out loud, if only for Lark's sake. *And Valor's lord probably shouldn't be endorsing theft. I guess.*

"Just tell them that you're doing the shopping for me, *three moons*," Lark groaned, pinching the bridge of her nose.

Heath's irritated gaze intensified - he shoved a smallish pouch into her hands. "Well, you're here now! So you do it."

Brook took the pouch from Lark, resisting the urge to chuck it at him. "I know this might be a world-ending tidbit of information for you, Heath, but you can't expect Lark to do everything for you. She's busy helping me work something out, so you'll need to fend for yourself until then."

"That was...a bit..." Lark didn't finish her sentence, trailing off - Brook guessed that the situation was already making Lark uncomfortable. *Maybe I shouldn't have interfered, but...Lark doesn't*

*deserve that treatment.*

Heath sneered at Brook. "What's so important about whatever Lark's doing that she can't get the stupid vegetables herself?"

Brook swallowed down her frustration. She *would* get through this conversation. "Even if you actually cared, it's none of your business." Before Heath could respond, Brook gave Lark a pointed glance. "We can head back to my place now, if you'd like."

Looking between her and Heath, Lark nodded. "That sounds great, actually." She inhaled sharply, only meeting Heath's gaze momentarily. "Please, just go get the vegetables? I am really busy."

"Whatever," he muttered, his grip on the bag tightening. "At least I won't have to deal with Brook for a while."

"Heath, just go," Brook replied through gritted teeth.

Glaring between her and Brook, Heath whipped around, headed off in the opposite direction. Lark grimaced, looking guilty. *She doesn't deserve to be treated like that...Heath should be feeling guilty, not her.* Brook wasn't going to comment on it, however. She began walking towards the marketplace exit, gesturing for Lark to follow. *Hopefully he does what she asked. It's the* least *he could do.*

...

"That should be everything," Brook said, shutting her travel bag. She and Lark spent the rest of the day packing - it wasn't the funnest thing, but Brook would be lying to herself if she said that having Lark around didn't help.

Lark wiped a bit of sweat off of her brow. "I sure hope it is!" She sighed, rubbing her hands on her pants. "It's been a while since I've had to pack for something like this."

Brook let out a quiet laugh. "Yeah, same. I've organised some Wingwatcher expeditions in the past few years, but haven't gone out like this for years now." She stretched her arms out. "Hopefully Foxglove and Parsley are ready for us. As well as Violet and Daffodil, but I don't expect them to be perfectly ready. It's their first

time, after all."

Slinging her sack over her shoulder, Lark sucked in her cheeks. "I *still* can't believe you managed to convince Petunia."

*Yeah, I can't, either.* "Well, I suppose I have my ways," Brook joked. She grabbed her own bag, shrugging. "Either way, I'm probably going to double-check to see if those two have everything. Otherwise, we'll leave right away."

Lark folded her arms into her sleeves. "Ah, right..." She shook herself a little, just barely meeting Brook's gaze. "Brook, can I be honest with you? I'm...already really terrified about leaving Valor. I know I'm the one who pushed this idea, but..."

Placing her hand on Lark's shoulder, Brook nodded slightly. "That's okay, Lark. You don't have to force yourself outside of your comfort zone to help me."

She frowned, shaking her head. "But I *do* want to come with you to find your son. It's just...another spike in anxiety, I guess. I'll try to get over it."

*That's still worrying, though? She shouldn't push herself like that.* Still, Brook wasn't going to argue with Lark. "I just want you to be okay, Lark. I know that I can't stop you from coming and you know I wouldn't, but...if it gets to be too much for you-"

"Then I'll be with you if it gets that bad. Right?" Lark finished, her voice full of nervousness yet with defiance at the same time.

Taking her hand, Brook looked her in the eyes. "I will. Just...know that I don't want anything to happen to you because of my problem, alright? And I won't blame you if you need a moment or need to stop."

Her cheeks flushed a bit, Lark exhaled softly. "Thanks. I'm still really anxious, but...that helped a bit."

Brook didn't bother trying to hide her smile. "Good. We can head out to the exit now and wait for the others, in that case."

Soon enough, they grabbed their bags and left the cave. Their light chatter filled the air as they walked through the mostly empty streets. Brook didn't see too many people out and about, which she was relieved for - she didn't particularly want to answer why she was out so late, and with Lark, no less. Lark gently nudged Brook's shoulder, grabbing her attention.

"Yes, Lark?"

Lark took a deep breath before responding. "I know it's...probably not the best time to bring it up, but...what exactly did Heath do earlier today?"

Scratching the back of her neck, Brook gave her a disgruntled shrug. "...Er, in simple terms, another thing I honestly would have no problem banishing him for."

Albeit her hesitant expression, she asked, "So another thing that just pushed the limit?"

"Caught him threatening Lacewing," Brook stated bluntly. "Obviously I can't trust him enough to keep himself completely scarce while I'm gone, but...hopefully the Wingwatchers can keep him in check for a bit."

Her shoulders sagging, Lark seemed to catch onto what Brook was implying. "Ah. It's that bad, huh?" She slid her arms into her shirt sleeves. "Why aren't I more surprised?"

Brook couldn't help but feel a stab of pity. *You deserve so much better, Lark.* "Don't dwell on it too much, alright? It isn't your fault that he's terrible."

Lark didn't reply to her, remaining silent. The closest thing to a response she gave Brook was leaning slightly against Brook. *I really hope she knows I don't blame her for Heath's stupidity.*

Once they reached the exit nearest to the ruins, Brook glanced around. Already there were Foxglove, Parsley, and Violet - among them was also Wintersweet, who Brook had asked to come with just in case. Two other Wingwatchers were guarding the exit, chatting

quietly with the others. Brook could make them out as Yarrow and Squirrel. *But where's Daffodil? Did she change her mind about wanting to go, or did Petunia change her mind?* Lark also seemed to share her concerns, her expression a frown.

Brook approached Foxglove first. "Foxglove, do you know where Daffodil is?"

Foxglove shrugged. "Still getting ready, I'd guess."

"She's going to be late *again*," Violet sighed expressively.

Inhaling sharply, Foxglove crossed her arms. "Yes, but we both are *used* to this."

Yarrow, who had been leaning against the tunnel wall, gave a slightly aggressive shrug. "A bit too used to it, if you ask me. What's keeping her?"

Crossing her arms, Violet glared at him. "Well, she has her mom to deal with. I hope she let Daff come with...I'd rather us be with each other in case something happens."

Lowering her head slightly, Foxglove let out a deep breath. "I don't blame you, Violet."

*I wouldn't be surprised if she was late because she lost track of time again or because of her mom...* Brook didn't want to comment on that, however. Daffodil would show up at some point.

"Regardless, are all of you packed? We might be out for a while," Brook asked.

Violet nodded. "My dads helped me pack."

"As am I," Foxglove added. She patted the straps of the bag slung over her shoulders. "Holly and Pine...*helped*. I finished packing on my own, though."

Brook tried to avoid letting out a few laughs. By now she knew exactly what Foxglove meant by Holly and Pine 'helping' her - namely, it was her sister and best friend constantly messing with

her while she attempted to do something. It was amusing to see Foxglove's reaction to it, and it honestly made Brook glad to see. *Even after everything Heath's put us through, some of us are still close. And that we're here for each other. A lot of the newer apprentices need to know that.*

Wintersweet had vis belongings kept in a bag similar to Foxglove. "I didn't have much time to pack, but so am I." Ve lightly brushed vis hand against it. "I might've been a bit overprepared, though."

"I'm also prepared, commander," Parsley said, somewhat interrupting Wintersweet. "I might've rushed it a bit since I didn't get much notice for this trip. But I promise I have almost everything!"

She shrugged off the slight interruption - it wasn't the worst thing Parsley's done. "Well, while we're waiting, you can check."

Parsley gave Brook a curt nod and began digging through her bag. Foxglove just rolled her eyes at Parsley and glanced at Lark.

"So...you're Ivy's mom, right? Lark, wasn't it?"

Lark nodded. "Uh, yes. I'd assume you're Foxglove? Ivy talked about you a lot."

Foxglove grinned. "Yep. Helped with her training and all." She let out a few quiet chuckles, as if she was remembering something. "She was a bit of a handful, but fun to work with."

"A handful? How exactly?"

Upon realising the implications of what she said, Foxglove shook her head. "Oh, not in a misbehaving way or anything like that. And honestly, it was more amusing than troublesome." She slowly turned to Violet, a teasing glint in her eyes. "Now Violet, on the other hand..."

Huffing, Violet rolled her eyes. "I am a diligent, well behaved Wingwatcher apprentice and have never tested Foxglove's patience once in my life. If you hear anything different from her, she's lying."

Playfully swatting at her, Foxglove let out a snort of laughter. "If you say so."

As the three continued their discussion, Brook looked back over to Parsley and Wintersweet. Parsley was biting at one of her fingernails, while Wintersweet was nervously buttoning and unbottoning vis bag.

"Did either of you pass by Petunia's place either?" Brook asked, grabbing their attention. Parsley scrunched her face up and shrugged, while Wintersweet simply shook vis head. "Maybe I should go check on her. Who knows if Petunia changed her mind-"

Before Brook could say anything more, racing footsteps diverted her attention. Rushing over to them was Daffodil, who already looked out of breath. Her hair wasn't in its usual ponytail, instead loose and messy. She had a bag containing her items, surely enough. *Looks like everything is going to fall out of it, though.* Behind her was her older sister, Daisy - she didn't seem to mind the walk, however. Daisy glanced around the tunnel exit briefly, before her expression morphed into something mildly disappointed. Brook was a bit confused at first, before sudden recollection hit her. *Right. She's dating Chipmunk.*

Once Daffodil reached them, she exhaled deeply, trying to catch her breath. "I escaped!"

Slightly baffled, Brook decided to take the bait and ask first. "You...escaped?"

"From my mom, obviously!" Daffodil replied, annoyed. She threw her hands up to the air. "She wouldn't leave me alone about how I need to 'make sure I be careful' or that I need to 'avoid getting in everyone's way'. Of course I'm going to be careful! It's not like I don't know anything about the surface. Like, would it kill her to trust me for once?"

"Probably," Violet joked, nudging Daffodil. Daffodil just glared at her, still annoyed. "Just try to ignore her for now, alright? You know that she's difficult when it comes to you."

Daffodil only nodded, looking too frustrated to want to continue the conversation. Instead, she turned to glance up at Lark. "Hi, Miss Ivy's mom! You remember me, right?"

Vaguely amused, Lark confirmed it. "Well, you're a very memorable personality." Violet just let out a half-laugh half-snort, which prompted Daffodil to swat at her. "Please, just feel free to call me Lark."

"Alright," Daffodil replied, though she didn't seem to be paying too much attention to Lark now. She turned to Daisy, who was awkwardly standing near her. Albeit slightly hesitant, she embraced Daisy in a short-lived hug. "Don't miss me too much, okay?"

Daisy returned the gesture as soon as she caught on, smiling. "Aw, I'll miss you too, Daffodil." She gave Violet a sly side glance. "Take care of my little sister, will you, Violet?"

"Of course," Violet said with an amused grin, ignoring Daffodil's offended protests. She waved to Daisy as she left, before turning to Brook. Her expression was now more serious, which honestly surprised Brook more than anything. "Are we heading out now?"

Brook scanned the others - everyone seemed to be prepared, and ready to go. Even Daffodil seemed fully packed, which Brook was mildly impressed by (though she guessed part of it was because of Petunia or Daisy, or both). *Well, there's no backing out of this now.*

She nodded. "Let's go."

...

**a/n: so...yeah, it's been a whole month since i uploaded, yes. this chapter was a bit of a monster to write mainly because god there were. so many ways i also could've taken this whole plot point? not in a "i'm not sure where this fic is going" way because i *do* know the plot it's just. the progression maybe? don't know how to explain it. i'm not entirely sure if this was the best way to go about certain plot points in the sense of it just being explained here and dealt with now rather than later, but i went with it mainly because it made the most since for**

**character reasons. along with that, i was having account issues on Wattpad and ended up switching accounts, plus both things irl and due to certain things on the internet just have kind of been screwing with my mental health, which is the other reason why this took a while to write**

**also - it's been stated in the updated author's note for the first chapter, but yes, i'm planning on rewriting some of the older chapters. while with others i might just put in a few edits here or there (which is actually what i've done for both chapter 8 and chapter 26, mainly because of feedback!), some i just wanna. completely rewrite lmao (so definitely expect rewrites of chapter 4 and 7 because i do *not* like them). also note that there's probably going to be. more changes with the rewritten chapters in the sense that it'll be more consistent with how i originally imagined the fic but written better lol**

**and one last thing before i leave this off is that i'm planning on making a sort of Dragonspeaker: Winglets thing if only for the fact that i'm aware i'm not going to be able to put everything i want to in here and there are some things with this story's plot for example that i. am probably not going to want to put directly in the main story since it'd feel distracting and would fit better in a side story than here, regardless of the fact that i have multiple povs for this fic. don't know when that'll go up, but expect it to happen at some point**

**all of that aside, hope this chapter was good enough to also celebrate this fic's one year anniversary since i published it (even if it's a little late)! i'm surprised by how far this fic has come and how much attention it got, but i genuinely appreciate it a lot and it honestly is a big motivator for me to keep writing about these funky little scavengers in WoF since other people seem to like it (even though i hold mostly no interest series besides that now). the next chapter will be Wren's ofc, hope y'all are just as excited as i am to get more into the Indestructible City plot (mine is mostly just character interactions but you know)**

# Chapter 28: Wren

**WREN**

The stares she got from the nearby villagers were making Wren's skin crawl. She was next to Ivy, who had the strangest mixture of alertness and drowsiness on her face Wren had ever seen. Both of them were surrounded by the Indestructible City's guards - the ones who captured them were in the front, shouting orders at the townspeople to get out of the way.

Moons, she wished she could fight, kick, or scream at them enough so they'd leave her and Ivy alone. Then they could make a run for it, find Leaf and Sky, and get away from the city. But it was already too late - they were well within the confines of the city. If they attempted, they'd have to find a way back down the cliffside, let alone fighting their way through more soldiers. *I can try later, when Ivy's more awake. Hopefully we can figure something out by then.*

*...And hopefully, Leaf and Sky know to stay away until then.* She wasn't sure if either of them managed to get away, but...she would sooner expect her brother and companion to attempt to save Wren and Ivy as soon as they could, compared to waiting it out. *Not that I could blame them, if they did. I would probably do the same thing.* At that point, she could only hope they would hold off any rescue attempts until then.

Her racing thoughts were the only thing that kept her from acknowledging how much closer they were to the actual castle - the place where the Invincible Lord resided. Though it wasn't much of a castle compared to the desert dragon palace, she supposed it was something considering humans made it. It was the building that was the furthest built into the city walls, studded by various beams seeming to hold up the ceiling. A few unlit torches marked the proper path to the entrance, which Wren honestly thought was unnecessary - especially when she saw the amount of *other* torches meant to light up any nearby areas. *Light is good and all, but I don't think this many is needed...* Especially since a good portion of the city

was technically still lit up by the sunlight. *This isn't like Valor - they actually live underground all the time. These people don't. Is this just for the Invincible Lord to flaunt how safe and protected his city is, or...?* After some moments, she decided that she didn't care enough for an answer.

As she kept walking with the guards and Ivy, Wren found herself occasionally peeking at the windows to the palace. *Is Undauntable in there? ...Probably.* It was something Undauntable never particularly shut up about during their meetings - how his father was the Invincible Lord. *Maybe it was Undauntable's fault for this whole thing. All because he can't take no for an answer.* It wouldn't exactly *surprise* her, per say, if that ended up being part of the reason she was captured.

In the back of her head, she felt something nagging at her that she was just looking to blame him now that she *had* been forced into the city. *I know that the guards were talking about bringing me to the Invincible Lord...so I know it'd be mostly for him. But maybe Undauntable helped.* Honestly, it just made her feel a smidge better about the whole situation to think of it like that, even if she probably shouldn't let that get in the way.

But she also didn't want to think about Undauntable right now. She'd deal with him when it was closer that time. She instead opted to focus her attention on Ivy, who was struggling to keep up. The anxiety in her gaze was mostly overshadowed by the drowsiness. She kept fidgeting with the loose straps of fabric on her tunic, subtly inching away from the guard near her and closer to Wren with every step they took. *She doesn't deserve to get caught up in this,* she thought, feeling a prick of anger. *The stupid Invincible Lord only cares about me. 'There might be some use for you', like hell they're hurting Ivy when I'm with her.*

Ivy leaned into Wren's shoulder. "I don't like it here," she mumbled. Her breathing sounded short, and her back was slightly hunched.

*I don't like it either, Ivy.* Wren didn't respond verbally, however - that would just draw attention to them, likely attention that neither of them would enjoy. She just decided to give Ivy a curt nod, gently brushing her fingers against Ivy's hand. Ivy acknowledged the

gesture with a slight, nervous smile, but quickly turned back towards the castle, wiping it off of her face. *At least she knows I'm here for her.*

As they drew closer to the castle, neither of them spoke up much - not that either of them felt particularly safe saying anything, Wren assumed. She knew she didn't, especially with the guards. Soon they approached the entrance, it looming over Wren despite her unimpressed attitude towards the castle. Her hands began to clam up as they walked in, and she could feel her cheeks losing their colour. *I need to get us out of here. We can't be stuck here, we have friends and family to get back to.* But no matter how many desperate thoughts she began to have, it wasn't going to suddenly put a stop to the inevitable.

The castle hallways were filled with people pacing about, some looking to be guards. Any others looked to be incredibly well off (probably worked with the Invincible Lord or was in his favour through family bias - it was likely both when Wren thought more about it). And honestly, the way some of them carried themselves was off-putting to Wren. She caught some staring at them being hauled in, which was far longer than it needed to be - she gave them nasty looks in response, but she was certain most of them couldn't see her facial expression (which honestly, she was half convinced both the guards and Ivy were grateful for that, if they noticed). It didn't make up for the fact that Wren was still being forced to see the Invincible Lord, but it did make Wren feel a smidge better.

It was a bit more walking, but soon they reached what appeared to be the entrance to the throne room. Wren tried to resist the urge to roll her eyes - of *course* he had a throne room. *For someone who parades himself on being the lord of the safest human city, he sure does nothing to actually protect anyone looking for refuge.* She wasn't going to risk saying that out loud, however - it'd probably get her something more than an annoyed glare as a response.

The guard in front turned to them, looking Wren and Ivy over. "We're entering the Invincible Lord's throne room. If you value your tongues, then you'll keep them in check."

Wren bit back a sharp retort and kept her mouth shut. *He's not getting anything out of me, anyways.* She could tell Ivy was growing more anxious as the guard glared at her, now brushing against Wren slightly. *And he's not harming Ivy, either.*

After a few more moments, the guard opened the thick doors, revealing the Invincible Lord's chambers. One would probably describe it as lavish - Wren thought it was better described as excessive. A red carpet was rolled out on the floor, with the purple and gold patterns shimmering in the torchlight. In between the torches themselves were the mounted heads of various animals, the only spark in their eyes being the torches flickering above them. Wren almost shuddered at the sight of them. *Thank the moons that Sky isn't here to see this. I don't think I could handle his reaction.* A few windows brought in natural light, which only made Wren feel more trapped. The outside of the walls was right there, and yet...

"Your lordship," the guard said, bowing. *Ugh.*

She couldn't quite see much in front of her once the guard stood back up, but she could make out some of the Invincible Lord while the guard was bowing. He seemed to have a somewhat similar resemblance to Undauntable, which she supposed made sense. He was outfitted in a robe that reached his feet, or at least while sitting. Underneath it was one of the cleanest white clothing Wren had ever seen on someone - she guessed it was either new, or he had enough people working for him that getting it regularly washed wasn't a problem. *Or maybe he just has several of the same shirt.* Wren honestly didn't care all too much, though. His fingers were decked with rings - one was already enough in Wren's opinion, but that wasn't even mentioning all of the *other* jewelry he adorned. It didn't help that his hair was rather well kept, too. Wren didn't get why he was so prepared when all he seemed to do was sit on his throne and watch people outside of the city perish. *I guess even awful people need to look their best before watching people's lives get ruined.*

From the corner of her eye, she also spotted another throne right next to his - it seemed to be used far less than the throne beside it, which made Wren assume it wasn't the Invincible Lord's throne. It was studded with various jewelry, and it had a soft, red cushion topping it. *Whose seat is that? I mean, I wouldn't be surprised if*

*Undauntable had his own seat, but...* Wren tried to brush it aside. It really wouldn't matter, anyhow - it was probably safe to assume that the Invincible Lord had more power than whoever was meant to sit there. *Or more power than anyone in this room, more like.*

She let her eyes dart around the room. *Where even is Undauntable, for that matter?* Maybe the Invincible Lord just needed his own time away from his son, or Undauntable was just out. *Probably not the latter. I'd be more shocked if he went anywhere outside of the city.* She wasn't all too worried about him, though. The longer it took before he noticed her within the city, the better.

"Silverfish," the lord replied, his voice slick. Wren held back the urge to grimace at him upon hearing him speak - *moons*, did it make her inwardly shudder. "I see you've brought me something, correct?" *Something? I'll show him 'something'-* Wren had to once again bite down on her tongue to keep herself from saying anything. *I'll save it for after he's out of earshot.*

Silverfish nodded. "Indeed, your lordship. We came across these two sneaking around in the forest near the encampment beneath the city - one of whom we believe to be the girl you were searching for."

A slight smirk hooked itself onto the Invincible Lord's face. "Excellent." Turning to the man standing next to him, he cleared his throat. "But just to be sure...Boar, do either of these girls strike a bell to you?"

Boar studied both Wren and Ivy, his eyes narrow. He had a disheveled look to him, mainly through the ragged clothing and the few scars visible on his face - his unruly, curly hair didn't help much, either. *How does he know about me? I don't recognise him - he wasn't one of Undauntable's bodyguards, I don't think, and I never saw him threatening the people in the line outside of the city. Maybe he was in the city during those times?* She guessed so - that didn't explain much about how he knew her, though. *Wait - when Sky and I helped Ivy deal with her crap father, maybe...?* She didn't have much time to fully complete that thought, however.

"I recognise the both of them, your lordship," Boar stated evenly, his gaze still focused on the two of them. "It'd be rather difficult to

forget the scene they caused in Valor." *Moons, he was* there. *He remembered everything about it. And he told the whole story to the Invincible Lord.*

*I shouldn't have agreed to Ivy's ridiculous plan.*

Sitting up slightly, the Invincible Lord raised an eyebrow. "Both, you say?"

Boar nodded. "Yes." First gesturing to Ivy, his expression morphed into a slight sneer. "The daughter of the so-called Dragonslayer, who made it painfully obvious she was helping stage the act." Ivy winced at his words, but said nothing - Wren wanted to punch Boar on her behalf. *He better leave Ivy out of this.* Boar then turned to Wren, an odd, slightly crooked grin formed on his face. "And the girl who the Dragonslayer's daughter was working with, the one who can control dragons."

The almost instantaneous whispers and shock rippled throughout the throne room. It made Wren's skin crawl, seeing everyone's eyes on her - she refused to show it, though. She'd felt uncomfortable knowing everyone's gaze was on her while threatening the Dragonslayer, and it wasn't much different to now. *Except until Ivy and I can get out of here, we're stuck at the Invincible Lord's mercy.* Wren would just power through it like she normally did with other things - think about how much worse of a look she could've gotten from her parents or the dragonmancers if she remained in Talisman.

*But controlling dragons? Is that seriously what that idiot thinks I was doing?* That was ridiculous - she'd never heard of anything like that happening, and even then, why would she do that to Sky? It felt gross to simply imagine herself doing that to Sky - well, anyone at all doing that. *I bet it's because they still haven't realised that just maybe, dragons are just as intelligent as we are. Idiots.*

It didn't help that she couldn't quite get the 'controlling dragons' bit out of her head. *These people genuinely seem to think that I can, as stupid as it sounds. If they think that and their lord wanted me in his city...* Wren's heart began beating at a quicker pace. *He wants me to work for him, like with the Dragonslayer.*

The masked expression of malevolent delight on the Invincible Lord's face was what really unsettled Wren, though. "I see. Both the Dragonslayer's daughter and the girl who can control dragons...you've outdone yourself, Silverfish."

"I was only serving you, your lordship," Silverfish replied, revealing not a hint of emotion in her voice. *I can't tell if she's trying to remain professional in front of the lord or if she's just emotionless.*

The Invincible Lord gave Silverfish a curt nod in response, then returned his attention back to Wren. "So you finally came back. I've heard quite a bit about you."

*And I've heard enough about you.* She wasn't going to say that out loud - or at least, not with the soldiers around. She decided to remain silent, at least for the time being.

"Honestly, you came sooner than expected. But that's not a problem at all - it saves me time, you know. I wasn't particularly looking forwards to hunting you down."

*He...he was expecting me? I mean, Boar's one thing, but how did the Invincible Lord-*

*That brainless piece of shit.*

Wren scowled at him. "Your son was in on this too?"

The lord let out an amused scoff. "I suppose you could say he did that." Reaching into his pocket, he pulled out a small, glittering dragon scale. Wren held in a gasp as the colour caught her eye - it was one of Sky's scales. It looked to be a baby scale, likely one that Wren had given to Undauntable years ago. "However, I think I'll let the scale do the talking instead."

*Whatever Undauntable did, his father saw him wearing those scales. That moons-blasted idiot just couldn't help but flaunt them about everywhere, could he? I never should've given those scales to him. I should've just traded with someone else, or left.*

Ivy pressed against Wren a little harder, now beginning to look visibly distressed. "Wren, why does he have one of Sky's scales?" she

whispered.

Before Wren could reply, one of the other soldiers cleared his throat. He glowered Ivy, grabbing her attention.

"*You* don't speak until you're spoken to."

Flinching, Ivy just glanced away, her eyes the glossiest Wren had ever seen. Stiffening, Wren whipped around to glare at him, anger shooting to her face. *Don't even think about threatening her more. She's already scared enough.* The guard held her gaze for a few more moments before the Invincible Lord cleared his throat once more. Wren begrudgingly gave him her attention once more, though not without gently nudging Ivy's shoulder as subtly as she could. *If I can or if we make it out of here alive, I can tell her about it later. And hopefully calm her down.*

The Invincible Lord eyed the scale, as if he was mocking both Wren and Ivy. "I'm sure my son would love to tell you all of the fine details on how I managed to put two and two together, but I could care less about that. Not now." Slowly lifting his chin, the lord's eyes bored into Wren. "You can make a guess as to why I wanted you here, yes?"

Wren gave him her dirtiest scowl yet. "Leave me out of your stupid plans. I'm not working for you."

With a roll of his eyes, the lord seemed unimpressed. "Save me your theatrics, girl. You lost your chance to back out of this the very moment you came to my city, let alone the moment you made yourself known to me."

Her fists clenching, she restrained herself from throwing a punch in the lord's face. *Not yet. He has guards in here.* "I didn't agree to shit. Now let us go already!"

A cold flash of resentment shone in the Invincible Lord's eyes before he glanced up at the soldiers surrounding Wren and Ivy. He gave a quick, subtle gesture - Wren was confused for a moment before she heard the swift shuffling of feet, the sound of a sword sliding out of its sheath, and the sudden lack of warmth near her side. Whirling

around, she was greeted with the sight of the same soldier who snapped at Ivy holding his sword near Ivy's throat. *Ivy!*

"Leave Ivy out of this!" Wren hissed, ready to strike him. She glowered at the Invincible Lord. "Your nonsense plan has everything to do with me, not her. Just let her go!"

With a nonchalant shrug, the Invincible Lord didn't have a sliver of remorse in his expression. "Your feelings towards this girl imply otherwise." *I- he can't use that against me, though! What's his deal?* "I'm afraid your unwillingness to cooperate has forced my hand."

*A load of bull, if I've heard any.* Still, though...there was a slim chance the Invincible Lord was simply bluffing. Wren and Ivy were surrounded, and the sword that was just barely about to graze Ivy's neck wasn't for show. Ivy gave Wren a desperate, pleading look as she was restrained by the guard - the few tears she had been holding out were now staining her cheeks, and she was visibly shaking.

"W-Wren-" Ivy choked out, before the sword pressed against her skin a bit harder. She could only let out a few quiet, choked up sobs - Wren wanted to beat the guard holding her captive and comfort Ivy so *badly*, but she knew it'd end horribly for them both if she tried.

*I'm not letting him hurt you, Ivy. If he does, I'm not going to hesitate.*

As she turned back to face the lord, Wren tried to fight back the urge to tackle him and punch his awful, smug expression more times than she could count. *He knows I despise him for this. He knows Ivy's terrified out of her mind and doesn't deserve to get involved in this.* Her anger spiked as she stared him down - prior to meeting him, she knew he was probably terrible. But he was somehow managing to be just as bad as the dragonmancers in his own way. *And he probably knows we're just teenagers, too.*

"Well? I believe I've made my point rather clear," the Invincible Lord said, raising an eyebrow. "Comply, and I promise no harm will be done to her."

Wren grimaced. *He's probably lying. He might just kill her anyways.* She took another glance at Ivy - Wren guessed that if she could speak without being threatened even more, Ivy would tell her that it wasn't worth it to agree. *Because she just can't help but be more concerned for everyone else than herself.* By the moons, it didn't bother her as much as it did *now*. *I can just come up with an escape plan later. I can't take back sacrificing Ivy - I couldn't do that to her. I'm not like my parents. I refuse to be like them.*

She inhaled sharply, now shaking a little. *I don't want to serve him. I don't want this at all.* "I..." she began, feeling her chest tighten at the sound of her own voice. *But I don't want Ivy to die.* "Are you being honest? Because if you plan on killing her anyways...then consider this a waste of time. Ivy's my friend and I refuse to do anything for someone who killed my friend just for kicks." She knew it was likely a stupid question to ask, and that he'd likely accuse her of stalling, but it didn't matter. *I can't trust this man or whatever he's promising. I know that for a fact.*

The Invincible Lord's grip on the armrests of his throne tightened, but he kept himself composed - likely for the sake of those watching. "Pigeon, you may sheathe your sword." As the guard hesitantly did so, the lord gave Wren a disdainful sniff. "Is that enough to satisfy you?"

Pulling Ivy closer to her, Wren frowned. *She's safe for now, but...* "Provided you or your soldiers don't make any more attempts, yes."

Though her face was still drenched in tears and she was still shaking, Ivy managed to blink at Wren in shock. "W-Wren..."

Wren tried to keep her own tears at bay as she met Ivy's gaze. "Ivy, don't," she whispered, unable to say much else.

An oily grin soon emerged on the Invincible Lord's face. "Glad to see we've reached a reasonable agreement." *I hope you're happy with yourself, you heaping pile of dragon dung.* "Silverfish, Pigeon, feel free to show these two to their room for the time being. I need some time to myself before discussing this further."

Without any chance to make a rebuttal, the two guards immediately

began escorting them - whether it was to avoid what was left of the Invincible Lord's wrath or simply to get rid of Ivy and Wren, Wren really didn't know. They quickly passed through the halls of the castle and into a hallway containing what she guessed were unoccupied rooms. Either from long gone relatives or former castle staff, Wren wasn't sure. All she knew for sure was that this was her new prison for who knew how long.

Silverfish and Pigeon left them alone in their room after briefly observing them. It was a short breath of relief after what had just happened. *Not that it makes me feel much better, but...it's something, I suppose.*

The room itself was somewhat small and dusty - it wasn't too far off to assume that it hadn't been used in quite some time. There were a few windows, though they barely showed much of the outside. From what Wren could see, they only gave a view of part of the city and perhaps the walls. Only a sliver of the sky was within her vision. A few drawers loitered the room, the one consistent thing in them being dust. In the corner of the room was a singular bed, which Wren thought was the most appealing thing in the room. It had a wooden frame, and...seemed to be made of a softer material than the bed she had back in Talisman. *I guess that shouldn't be all too surprising, though. This* is *a royal family, I suppose.*

Without thinking, she inadvertently glanced over in Ivy's direction. She still looked rather shaken up, but seemed to be making an attempt to keep herself occupied by examining the room. *Isn't Ivy technically royalty? Or ex-royalty? I mean, if what I've heard about her dad isn't too far off...* Wren kind of wanted to ask, if only to help relieve the tension, but she supposed asking about Ivy's messy family history wouldn't be much better. *Plus, I doubt she had any fancier beds than the others in Valor...from what I remember, her dad didn't even spend any of the gold, anyways.*

Her shoulders slumped. *Regardless of the quality, it doesn't change the fact that this is the only bed in here. Am I seriously going to have to go back to sharing beds again?* Last time Wren had a bed, she often had to switch between sharing it with Leaf or Bluebell, since her parents often preferred to simply lump the youngest together and be done with it. It wasn't the *worst*, but...Wren could go without sharing a

bed for another lifetime. *Ivy better not snore, kick in her sleep, or especially hog the blanket. Leaf and Bluebell were bad enough.* Wren was about to ask Ivy about that, though she didn't get a chance - thanks to Ivy's ridiculous sneezing catching her off-guard.

Ivy let out a heavy sniff. "Ack, why is it so *dusty* in here?"

"Probably because no one's used it in a while, I'd guess," Wren suggested, patting the mattress and blanket for any dust left on them. If Ivy was complaining about the dust from across the room, she guessed Ivy would have a bigger problem if it was on the bed. "What, is it choking you to death or something?" *Wait- moons, I probably shouldn't have phrased it like* that*, crap-*

Crossing her arms, Ivy glared at the top of one of the drawers for a split-second before sighing. "No, but it sure *feels* like it." She walked over to the bed, sitting down. She let out another sneeze, groaning. "Ugh, I hate this..."

Wren sat down with her, being careful to avoid kicking up more dust. "The dust or just everything about this in general?"

Ivy's face scrunched up, nodding. "Well, I was just referring to the dust but...yeah." She hunched over slightly, pressing her hands closer together. "You could probably tell, but...by the three moons, Wren, I'm so *terrified*. I hate it here so much...I know it doesn't mean much to you, since you hate him and all, but my dad was right to not trust anything that Invincible Lord said."

Leaning onto her a bit, Wren simply closed her eyes. "Yeah, well your dad was right about that. Stupid Invincible Lord." Feeling Ivy shudder a little, Wren jerked back, her eyes fluttering open. "Ivy?"

"I- sorry. I just..." Ivy was squeezing her eyes shut, trembling now. A few tears wormed their way out despite how hard Ivy was struggling to keep them in. "H-he threatened to *kill* me, Wren. Just so you'd do whatever it is he wants you to do. I mean, it isn't anything new to me - in a way. Being the Dragonslayer's daughter had it's...perks, both good and bad. B-but..." Almost hesitantly, she gently touched the very spot the blade had rested on her neck. "I could really feel it pressing, you know?"

*I swear, I'm just about ready to just beat the living daylights out of the Invincible Lord, guards or not.* Not entirely sure what to do, Wren awkwardly hugged Ivy, ignoring the shivering terror running down her own spine. *Besides, I don't think my angry rant would comfort her much...not to mention, I don't think I can say half the things I want to without being overheard.* Ivy fiercely hugged her back, which surprised Wren for a moment - but she didn't particularly mind. It felt better when reciprocated, anyways.

Exhaling softly, Wren lifted her chin slightly so she could speak. "I promise that we'll make it out of here alive, alright? The both of us."

Drawing back, Ivy wiped away a dribble of snot and tears - which squicked Wren out, but she wasn't about to call Ivy out like that. She let out a low chuckle. "Normally I'd ask just to make sure, but...you're Wren. Of course you will, won't you?"

*You're over-exaggerating my abilities a bit much,* she thought, but it was a nice boost to her confidence. *And I'm honestly not sure how long it could take, or how long we have.*

Wren nodded, taking hold of Ivy's cleaner hand. "I will. We'll make it out of here and see Leaf and Sky again, I promise." *And we'll never come back here again.*

...

**a/n: first off i will start this off with this chapter takes place sometime shortly after the first section of chapter 25 and so will the next.**

**alright so uh. while i was very excited to write this chapter for various reasons, do note that i have not written the Invincible Lord much if at all until now (though we don't have all too much information on him and frankly because it took a while to get to this plot point i've been anticipating for so long now it gave me. way too much time to think of a few headcanons about him). and i'll be honest i genuinely do feel like in this situation Ivy just being there with Wren would end up in the**

**Invincible Lord using it to his advantage at some point - which this won't be the only time this thing happens. mainly because i still feel like there's wasted potential in a way in regards to Ivy's whole status as the Dragonslayer's daughter and also for character-driven plot reasons if that makes sense and without giving away too much. on a sort of lighter note yeah Ivy does in fact have a dust allergy in this fic and while it's also partially for projection reasons it's sort of relevant to some character bonding reasons later on**

**the next chapter will be in Undauntable's pov because i feel it can work smoothly here and god i. i really want to write Ivy and Undauntable interactions sooner rather than later**

# Chapter 29: Undauntable

**UNDAUNTABLE**

As Snakeroot held the castle door open for him, Undauntable dug his arms deeper into his robe. *I can't believe it,* he thought bitterly. *I thought I saw her, but she wasn't there...* Earlier that morning, Undauntable had been watching out one of the castle windows, looking to spot Wren - though he honestly doubted it, and was beginning to hope she didn't. He was certain he saw her, so he set out with his bodyguard to go check. Only for them to get caught up in something *stupid* in the process, and then to find out Wren was just...gone. Or she just hadn't shown up, which was more likely. *It's probably for the better if she doesn't, anyways.*

It wasn't that he didn't want to see Wren - far from it, in fact! In the past years, she had been one of the few people willing to give him the time of day, and unlike most of the others, she was actually *interesting*. It was the main thing he looked forwards to, even if she managed to tick him off every time she visited. *If what Boar said to Father was true, then...* He didn't want to imagine *what* his father might do to her. During the few briefings his father let Undauntable sit through, he'd heard enough about his plans regarding the Dragonslayer. How he'd convince the Dragonslayer to come, what measures he would take in order to bring him to the city, how he'd go through with fighting back against the dragons once he did that, and more. It was the memories of those briefings that worried Undauntable - would his father be willing to go to extremes just to have Wren working for him? *Why am I even asking that? He would.*

Once the door behind him shut, Snakeroot caught up to his side. "Well, it's better to check than not at all, right?" she asked, likely in an attempt to start some small-talk. She was one of the few soldiers in the city that bothered to try - he guessed it was partially because she was essentially his personal bodyguard at that point, but also because it was probably easier to relieve the awkward tension.

Undauntable shrugged. "Maybe, but it still wasted my time!" He

stopped her in her path briefly, glancing over at one of the hallways. Further down he could spot the kitchen - not that he needed to, anyways. He knew the castle like the back of his palm. "I'm hungry."

Holding back a sigh, Snakeroot nodded. "Of course, your highness."

*I bet what she really wanted to say was "for the sake of the moons, Prince Undauntable, couldn't you have spoken up while we were in the market" but can't because she'd get in trouble for it.* Honestly, as annoying as it was, Undauntable didn't mind that about her, either. It was a more tolerable conversation than one with his father, for starters. *Doesn't make it any less annoying, though.*

As they walked into the kitchen, the smell of fresh fruits hit his nose. *Did we just get a new batch of fruit sent in?* If they had, it must've been while he was out - not that it mattered much. *Fruit's fruit.* He scanned the countertops, trying to pick out which would be the easiest to take without getting noticed too easily. Not too many people were in the kitchen to begin with, but...he knew how some of the castle's cooks got when he took food without their permission. *Hopefully it isn't too long before supper...*

"Ah, Prince Undauntable. I didn't expect to see you back so soon." Undauntable jumped at the sound of the voice - he whirled around to see Duckweed, one of the cooks of the castle. He had an uninterested expression on his face, like most of the castle staff. It was usually like that when Undauntable seldom rarely talked with him, which stung a little, but Undauntable tried to pay it no mind. *I shouldn't even care about what they think.*

Undauntable gave him a curt nod. "Just getting a snack."

Turning back to the cabinets, Duckweed gave him a sideways glance. "Hmm. Just don't touch any of the vegetables, alright?"

"I wasn't planning on taking any!" he protested, irritated by the suggestion. He didn't even *like* vegetables that much - especially not the ones his father typically got. Duckweed just let out a heavy sigh, saying nothing. Forcing himself to quell his frustration, Undauntable decided to try and change the subject, at least slightly.

"What's the deal with the vegetables, anyways?"

Duckweed gave him a nonchalant shrug. "A little celebration or something, Invincible Lord's orders."

*Really? He must be in a good mood, then.* While it wasn't rare for the Invincible Lord to have guests over and request that the kitchen staff cook more than usual, he hardly ever called for a celebration. *And when he does, he makes a bigger deal about it.* Undauntable would have to worry about that later, however - it wasn't like he'd find out any time soon.

Snakeroot raised an eyebrow at Duckweed. "Oh? Did I miss anything important while I was out with the prince?"

His gaze darting around the room, Duckweed hesitantly nodded. "You could say that." He leaned in a bit closer, glancing at the exit one last time before looking back at Snakeroot. "Overheard him boasting about it to the head chef. Not sure if I'm allowed to say it before he does, but...well, he found 'em." *Found them...?*

As Undauntable was cutting an apple into a few slices, he caught Snakeroot's eyes go wide - she met his gaze for a quick moment, before glancing away. *What is she...?*

*Oh no. Moons, no-*

"I see," Snakeroot eventually said, giving him a curt nod. She turned to Undauntable. "We should be heading out now. You got everything?"

Placing the knife down and picking up his bowl, Undauntable could only give her a slight nod. *Why would she come back so soon? I mean, she didn't get her supplies but...I think she's willing to overlook that provided she's still angry with me.* It got on Undauntable's nerves just to think about - she was presumably living in the wild, wouldn't it be safer to have supplies with her, at the very least? But it didn't matter, anyways. His annoyance was overwhelmed by his concern now that his father's plan seemed to be successful.

*I don't want him to hurt Wren. I really don't.* There wasn't much he

could do about that, however. Undauntable simply tightened his grip on his bowl of apple slices and left the kitchen, with Snakeroot following him on the way out. His hands shook slightly as he kept thinking about it - what his father might do to get Wren to comply. Snakeroot seemed to be thinking of the same thing, though it was hard to tell due to the somewhat distant look on her face.

Not discussing the matter, Undauntable eventually headed to his room. Snakeroot remained outside, likely to go on her first break of the day. Undauntable didn't mind when she did that - it was nice to get some privacy, even if he could only stay within the castle if he had no bodyguard present. He lay quietly on his bed, staring at the ceiling. His bowl of apple slices was next to him, still untouched. Undauntable hadn't been able to bring himself to eat, entirely too preoccupied with his thoughts of Wren and his father.

*Why did she come back? Moons, this shouldn't have happened...* It shouldn't have - that was a fact that Undauntable knew for certain. *But it did, and I didn't even manage to find her in time. I could've stopped her.* He wasn't exactly sure *how* he would've, Wren's stubbornness considered, but it would've been something.

Sitting up, he picked up one of his apples. He let out a defeated sigh. *All I can do is just hope for the best.*

...

A knock on his door stole Undauntable's attention as he laid on his bed, his empty bowl getting knocked over in the process. *How long has it been since I got back?* He glanced over at his window, frowning. It couldn't have been too long - he could still see bits of midday sun peeking through the window curtains. *So it shouldn't be supper time, right?*

The knocking grew louder, more impatient - Undauntable sighed and got up, headed towards the door. He opened it, unsure of who to expect. *Probably not Father, he never knocks or comes to me for any conversation we have.* In front of him was a vaguely recognizable figure - if only through face. He was one of the Invincible Lord's various councilors, typically by his side whenever possible. Undauntable could never remember his name, and he was almost

certain that the councilor felt the same (then again, his father probably complained about Undauntable's inadequacy as an heir often to his council).

The councilor just eyed Undauntable. "The Invincible Lord wishes to speak with you, young prince."

Undauntable's heart practically leapt out of his chest. *He...wants to speak with me?* At first he felt a rush of excitement - right before it was overcast by a wave of fear crashing down on him. *He wants to speak with me.* The Invincible Lord didn't often make the time to talk with Undauntable over things he considered miniscule - which was most things relating to Undauntable. *This...this is probably about Wren again.*

But this time his father *had* Wren - or at least, that was what Undauntable was guessing. Undauntable had already gotten the cold shoulder and occasional berating from his father for being 'even more incompetent than ever' whenever it came to that subject. *Is he...going to be even worse because I couldn't live up to his standards?* He didn't want to think about it - the answer was pretty obvious, anyways. *And I can't get out of it, either. Just my luck.*

Instead of protesting, Undauntable just gave the councilor a simple nod. Over the years, Undauntable learned that he was better off just complying with his father's councilors, similarly to himself. He was *not* willing to pop that unstable bubble of safety. "Of course, sir."

The councilor stepped to the side as Undauntable walked out of his room. He gave the councilor one last nod of acknowledgement before heading off in the direction of his father's throne room. *If that's where he is, anyways...* It was likely that he was, though - surely he'd be done with his other meetings if he was willing to speak with Undauntable? *Probably. He rarely lets me sit with him during those...*

Thinking about it wouldn't help him much, however. He made his way through the halls, avoiding the questioning stares a few passerby gave him. Before much longer, Undauntable found himself in his father's throne room. The Invincible Lord was seated on his throne, looking impatient. *I took too long again, didn't I?*

Undauntable brushed out the wrinkles in his robe quickly. After, he cautiously bowed - even as the Indestructible City's prince, he was still expected to bow before greeting him when in his throne room.

"Undauntable," he greeted, a sharp edge to his voice. Undauntable jerked upwards, growing tense upon recognising his tone. *He's not going to hide his anger with me.* "I assume you're aware of why I called you here?"

He shrunk back a bit, unable to fully meet his father's gaze. "I..." Undauntable tried to speak, but he found himself struggling to force the words out. He simply nodded, fearing for the worst.

The Invincible Lord eyed him disapprovingly. "Good." He didn't need to say anything more for Undauntable to get the hint; that he was a pathetic son. "Well, it doesn't matter any more. I've found her already."

*He does have Wren.* Undauntable could feel his heart beginning to race - where was she, then? *In the castle dungeons, maybe?* He doubted it, but...Wren surely wouldn't have just accepted it, would she? *She wouldn't...she'd probably have no problem yelling at him, either.* Undauntable desperately wanted to ask, but he knew that would be a terrible idea. If he did, then his father would know for certain that Undauntable cared about Wren - while Undauntable always thought his father's perceptiveness was impressive, he did *not* want to be on the receiving end of it. *He always tries to turn things to his own advantage,* he thought. *And I know he'd use it against me, son or not.*

Undauntable wasn't going to say anything, however - not until he was prompted.

"She was irritating to deal with, though," he commented, curling his lip slightly. "Too stubborn for my liking. But it wasn't too difficult to get her to agree."

*W-what did he do to get her to agree? She'd never actually agree to his plan willingly...* Undauntable couldn't help but feel another shot of fear course through him - the Invincible Lord usually managed to get what he wanted out of people he deemed useful him, and there

was good reason for that. Whether it be through fear, manipulation, or bribery...half the time he was able to have something falling into his favour. He'd seen his father do it often enough to be able to tell. He never thought much about the people he did it to before, but now that Wren was captured by him...

He knew better than to display his nerves and worry for her in front of the Invincible Lord, though. Undauntable was unsure how well he was doing, but he tried to keep from letting his hastily thrown together mask fall apart already. He remained silent, not wanting to give anything more away.

The Invincible Lord's gaze was directly on him, a line forming in between his brows. "I do wish you had been more honest with me. It would've saved us both a lot of trouble."

*But...if I did that, Wren would hate me for it. And you'd crush her.* Undauntable kept himself from letting that slip out loud - not only would it potentially make things worse for Wren, it'd also tug on his father's wrath. *He might be toning it down right now, but...I bet he's livid with me. Even though those scales I got from Wren told him enough, he's still angry.* Undauntable took another look at his father's face; his lips were pressed together, and his eyes were squinted.

"Then again, you're pathetic. So I suppose I shouldn't have expected that much from you in the first place."

*Is this meant to be so he can tell me how useless I am?* Not that it would be surprising to Undauntable - it wasn't the first time his father would say something like it to his face, or would off-handedly mention it if in the mood. Undauntable desperately wanted to argue that he wasn't pathetic, and that he could be useful, but...it wasn't worth it. *And what have I done that isn't pathetic, anyways?*

The Invincible Lord slowly raised an eyebrow at him. "No response? In that case, I'm hoping you get the point." Before Undauntable could give any sign that he was still listening, the Invincible Lord went on. "Anyways. Like I said, she was being difficult to work with. While it's normally a minor inconvenience for me, with her...well, I want to start this plan as soon as possible."

*What makes this any different?* "Already?"

He nodded. "Indeed. You must understand that this girl can control dragons, boy. If this plan is to succeed, then she needs to cooperate."

Undauntable held back a retort in his head; his father *had* to be aware that Wren wasn't going to easily comply, even if he managed to get her to agree. Saying she'd do it was one thing. Getting her to do so was another. *I don't want to know what he's going to try and do to force her to work with him.*

"But I'm afraid she won't come around too easily. Which leads me to my next point." The Invincible Lord stared Undauntable in the eyes. "I know why you kept heading outside of the castle walls and down at the encampment. Perhaps you can now make up that time to me and keep an eye on her."

His heart pounding against his chest, Undauntable wanted to curl up on his bed and cry. *I can't do that, I don't want to do that-* Even if Wren was frustrating every single time she came to the city, he couldn't bring himself to do anything like that. *And I didn't do anything to protect her from this. Father knows about the dragon scales, the constant sitting by the window, leaving the castle walls...how much else does he know about it?* Undauntable decided he didn't want the answer to that - it'd only serve to heighten his anxiety, anyways.

"M-me?" Undauntable's voice cracked - he wanted to yell at himself for letting that slip in front of his father, of all people, but didn't bother correcting himself.

Groaning, the Invincible Lord trudged over to the nearest window, refusing to look at him. "Quit your whimpering. You should be grateful I'm even allowing you to see her at all, let alone speaking to her. I can't afford this plan failing, you sniveling brat."

*I mean, I'm glad I can at least talk to her, but...* Undauntable wasn't sure if he'd be able to meet his father's expectations - well, he *wouldn't*, but he was sure he wouldn't be able to reach the bare minimum. *He probably expects me to mess it up. So I don't think he's seriously putting his faith in me.* It stung, but it wasn't the worst

punch to the gut he'd ever received. His father's said worse. He'd be fine in that regard, wouldn't he?

*But still...what does he think I can do to keep an eye on her? Or convince her to cooperate? She'd sooner bite my finger off...*

"Of course, it's far from an important task in my plan," the Invincible Lord said, confirming Undauntable's doubts. "But perhaps it'll do you good to learn how to handle people like her."

*People like her? What does that mean-?* Undauntable didn't have much energy or time to ask himself that question, however. His father wouldn't answer, anyways. All he could do was hope that his father didn't have alternative plans in mind to convince Wren that would be...far worse than sending Undauntable out to talk to her.

*Maybe...one question won't hurt?* "Where is she staying?" he managed to choke out.

The Invincible Lord exhaled slowly, not bothering to cast him a second glance. "The rooms on the lower floor, to the right." *Those rooms? We haven't had to use them for a while...they might be pretty dusty still.* He wasn't going to comment on that, though - his father would find it to be a pointless discussion, and one that would imply he doesn't take good care of the castle.

Undauntable nodded, staying in place for a bit. How was he going to start a conversation with her now? *I bet she won't bother to answer me, anyways,* he guessed, already feeling a prick of disappointment. *Father realises that, doesn't he?*

He glanced over his father's grim expression once more - his brows were furrowed, a line in between them. It wasn't an expression the Invincible Lord wore often, or at least in front of guests and his staff. It was more typically reserved for Undauntable when he was especially disappointed in him. *He knows.*

"You're dismissed," the Invincible Lord muttered, flicking his hand in the direction of the door. "Don't be late for supper."

Restraining the urge to let out a sigh of relief, Undauntable gave the

Invincible Lord one last bow before heading out of the room. *Hopefully I can get Wren to talk to me...*

...

The downstairs halls were dustier than Undauntable last thought. He hadn't been down there often, mainly due to the lack of residency - they were reserved for family members and in some rare cases, nobility that was unrelated to the current royal family line. But by now, there weren't as many people around to use them, mainly due to the dragon attacks. *Even as the Indestructible City, it doesn't mean its people are...* That was something *anyone* would dare say out loud. But it was well known at that point, an unspoken fact of life that everyone had to accept sooner or later.

*At least we're the safest, compared to the other cities,* he concluded, though he wasn't too sure nowadays. The rumours about Safe Harbor seemed to speak otherwise. *But I'm not going to think about that. They...might just have gotten unlucky. Or had poor defenses. Our city isn't like that.*

He forced himself to return to his task: finding Wren and talking with her. *If she'll talk to me.*

He glanced down the hallway once more. *Which room is it, though...?* He really wished his father had told him which one, but...it was too late for that now. *And he probably thinks that this is already putting too much faith in me,* he thought, unable to stop himself from thinking it. *I can't think about that right now.* Despite it still lingering in his head, Undauntable scanned the first few doors he saw, all shut. *I can't imagine he'd want her too far away from the first floor. It'd be easier for him to have a shorter walk to check on her.*

Undauntable quietly walked up to the first one, listening for any hint of life. All he was greeted with was silence. *Maybe she just hasn't noticed? Or she's ignoring me.* Inhaling sharply, he lightly knocked on the door, not expecting much. He pulled back a bit, basking in the uncomfortable silence for a bit longer. *Not this room, I guess.* Just as he was about to move onto the next, however, he could hear...muffled chatter coming from behind the door. *Wren? This is her room?* Moons, he hoped.

*But why...why am I hearing two distinct voices? I know Wren's, but...* Someone else had to be with Wren - that was the only reasonable conclusion he could come to. *I mean, she could just be speaking to herself and changing her voice slightly to sound deeper, but that's really unlikely.* Undauntable couldn't guess who it would be, though. He doubted his father would've sent anyone else down to deal with Wren; the Invincible Lord would probably prefer to deal with her himself when it came down to it. *Did Wren bring another person with when she came here...?*

...No, no. That couldn't be right, could it? Wren lived alone - or at least, that was what Undauntable was assuming. *And with that dragon she has, if Boar really was telling the truth about her and those dragon scales...* It didn't help with the things she'd say - didn't she say she hated people once? Or more than once...Undauntable wasn't quite sure on that. Why would she bring another person with her to the city?

*Well, it doesn't matter. I've got to talk to her anyways.*

Undauntable went back up to knock on the door again; before he could do so, the door creaked open, just a bit. *Hmm? She...actually opened it up?* As it opened a bit more, Undauntable was able to catch at least one of them - not Wren, but the other person with her.

She was somewhat tall, having a lean but vaguely muscular frame. Her skin tone was lighter than Undauntable's own, or Wren's - which intrigued Undauntable more than he wanted to admit. *She's probably from somewhere further away from here, then. Somewhere where she doesn't get much sunlight, either.* She wore a simple tunic that was a muted purple with brown patches woven into it - Undauntable guessed it was one that was simply added onto over the years. It had an odd style to it, though - one Undauntable only remembered seeing once, from a past audience with another visitor to the Indestructible City. *Maybe it's a cultural thing.* Her dark brown eyes were full of anxiety, and the way her hair was messed up didn't help her hide it, either. *Oh moons, did she get taken here with Wren? Father didn't need her - he couldn't have let her go, at least?* Just as the stranger was about to speak, another person peeked their head out of the door to see. Undauntable's heart began racing - it

was Wren.

She noticed him right away, fuming. "Absolutely fucking not! Screw this, I'm going back to sleep!" Wren immediately slammed the door shut, shocking both Undauntable and the other girl. *So...she's still livid with me.* He couldn't help but feel hurt - it wasn't like he came with bad intentions, was it? *She probably doesn't care about why I came, though...*

He stood in front of the shut door for a few more seconds - he could hear the two of them bickering from inside. This time, however, he could barely make out what they were saying.

"Wren, seriously?"

"I don't care! ... It's not worth it."

"How do you know?"

Undauntable couldn't catch what Wren mumbled after that, but he immediately threw out the possibility of anything remotely positive towards him minutes ago. There was a bit more back and forth, before the other girl slowly opened the door, a tired yet cautious expression on her face.

"Are your guards with you?" she asked, keeping her voice a whisper.

He shook his head. "No! It's just me." Digging his hands into his robe's sleeves, he grimaced. "I just wanted to talk to Wren. That's all."

The girl quickly glanced over her shoulder briefly, before sighing and opening the door fully. "Don't provoke her. We've had a long day."

As Undauntable entered the room, she shut the door. Upon seeing him, Wren met his gaze for a few seconds - it immediately morphed into an intense glare. She walked over to him, rage overtaking her every step.

"*You*," she hissed, her hands curled into fists. "Undauntable, you're such a moron! What the hell is *wrong* with you?"

Undauntable flinched; it wasn't the same way his father would word his commentary about him, but it stung all the same. "I-I...what did I do?"

Wren's eyes went wide, harshening equally as much. "Are you kidding me? You just couldn't help but let the Invincible Lord know that I was the one who gave you those dragon scales! Now he thinks I can control dragons, for whatever stupid reason. And it's all thanks to you."

"Wren, I know you're angry at him, but it wasn't all him," the other girl butted in, the expression on her face looking frantic. "The Invincible Lord pretty much said he had spies in Valor. There's no way Undauntable could've been part of *that*, judging from the way the lord spoke about it." *Why's she defending me?*

"But Ivy, you saw the scale the Invincible Lord had! I'm the only one who has those scales," Wren argued, whipping around to look at her. "How else would that pompous idiot figure it out so quickly?"

The girl - Ivy - threw her hands up. "I'm not denying that! But we both know that it wasn't just Undauntable. It won't do any good to take out everything on him."

Wren grimaced. "I know that. It's just..." She brushed a strand of her hair out of her face, crossing her arms. "Never mind. What did you want? A chance to gloat about how I'm finally in your precious city and share the wonders of these prison walls you call safe? Because I'm not in the mood for either."

He shook his head. "No! I'm not here to do that." *I mean, I'm happy to see you, but not like this...* Inhaling sharply, he tried to ignore his palms sweating up. "I just wanted to check on you. I was hoping that my dad didn't find you, but..."

"Well, you thought wrong," Wren finished. "He got both me and Ivy, and now I'm being forced to work for him."

*Moons, this can't be happening...* He was desperately hoping to wake up in a cold sweat, and find out that he was just having a nightmare about his father's plan. *This can't be real. It just can't.*

But it was. His father's plans rarely failed - and the sight of Wren standing before him only proved that fact further. *He's going to do anything in his power to make sure Wren obliges...if she really can control dragons, then he won't stop at anything to keep her within the city.*

Undauntable lowered his head slightly. "I know. I don't know what exactly he wants with your friend, but..." He glanced back up at Wren. "He's not going to let you go until he gets what he wants, if he even considers letting you go."

Wren let out a mocking snort of laughter. "I'm sure the two of us have very different ideas of 'letting me go,' Undauntable. He only got me to comply because he threatened to kill Ivy. I know damn well what he'd attempt if I don't turn out to be as useful as he hoped."

*Him threatening people isn't new, but...her?* He looked over Ivy once more; she couldn't be too much older than him, if at all. *He really will stoop lower to make sure this plan succeeds.*

He nodded. "Yeah, I figured that already." He wiped the sweat on his palms onto his robes, sighing. "I really didn't mean for him to do this to you, I promise. I tried to stop him as much as I could, but..."

"You didn't try hard enough," she spat, digging her nails into her arms. "Because now Ivy's caught up in something she doesn't deserve to be in, my family is worried sick about me, and I'm about to be used as your father's tool! And all for that stupid belief that I can control dragons."

*She...can't? Then how...?* Undauntable couldn't quite shake off he question, but he wouldn't dare ask it. Wren would just bite his head off if he did. Ivy just placed her hand on Wren's shoulder, a sympathetic look on her face.

"Wren, look at me," she said, grabbing Wren's attention. "We'll figure something out. You promised me that we'll make it out alive, right?"

She nodded, albeit weakly. "Y-yeah, but that was *me*."

Ivy smiled a little at her. "I know. And I'm doing the same for you. I'm still really terrified and worried about what the Invincible Lord might do to me, but...I'm not letting that stop me from promising you that, either."

Wren still looked doubtful, but didn't argue. She instead turned back to Undauntable. "So was that it? An apology for your failure? Because it's a little late for that."

Undauntable frowned. *She's not going to stop bringing it up, is she?* "No, that's not it." He met Ivy's gaze. "You both wanted to get out of here?"

"Are you offering your help?" Ivy asked, much to Undauntable's mild annoyance. Couldn't she just let him explain his plan?

He simply nodded, not wanting to waste more time. Who knew when his father or one of the guards would come looking for him. "Well, I can't make any promises, but...I don't like the fact that you both are trapped here against your will, either. I want to make sure you get out of here safely." *Wren would never stay here willingly, and it's not even safe for her. If I can get her out of here, she'll be safe.*

He looked over Wren again; despite the terror and bitterness in her gaze, she still had the same stubborn glint in her eyes when he first met her. *I still don't get why anyone would want to live outside of the city, but...if Wren really did have her own dragon since she was nine, then she'll be fine.* He still found it difficult to convince himself of that, though - even with the pale orange scales as evidence. *I wish she wanted to be here with me, but...even if she did, Father wouldn't allow it.*

"You better not be saying this just to trick us, Undauntable," Wren snapped through gritted her teeth. "Because I've had enough nonsense from other human beings to last me an entire lifetime."

Ivy leaned into Wren a bit, her face slightly scrunched up. "Wren told me about your...relationship with each other. And honestly, I can't blame her for feeling the way she does." She stared him directly in the eye. "You promise to get us both out? No trickery involved?"

*I can't make a promise on something I'm not even too sure about, can I?* He couldn't keep Wren from getting captured, but on the other hand, he couldn't even manage to assist his father. Could he really manage this? *Probably not, but...I don't think I can handle just watching what might happen or listening to the plans Father has in mind for Wren, or even her friend.*

Undauntable took in a shaky breath. "I'll try my best."

Ivy smiled at him, a sliver relief on her face. "Thank you."

Wren eyed him, her gaze full of suspicion. "You just spend the last few minutes apologising for failing to do...anything, really. How am I supposed to trust your best?"

Undauntable opened his mouth to respond, but found himself unable to come up with a defense. *She's not wrong about that.* It wasn't like all those things his father said about him weren't false - he was pathetic and useless, more often than not. He'd make a better stool than a lord, his father once said. *It's...not wrong. At all. But...*

"Please, just let me try," he forced out. "I *want* to help." *I want to do this for you, Wren.*

"I'll believe it when I see it, but fine." Wren let her shoulders slump, trudging back over to the bed. "Don't think this means I trust or like you. I still want to beat you to a pulp."

Flinching a little, Undauntable just kept his mouth shut and nodded. *That's the best I'll get from her, at least for now...* He exhaled softly, turning around to leave. "I'll be back later. I don't want Snakeroot pestering me about suddenly disappearing." As he finished speaking, he felt a hand touch his shoulder - Ivy. "What?"

She blinked a few times, as if surprised by his sudden shift of tone. "I know we've never talked before now, and aren't on the best terms, but...be careful, okay?"

Undauntable rolled his eyes at her. "You're worrying about the prince of the Indestructible City. I'll be fine." *Moons, absolutely not!*

*Father's probably going to find out and he'd kill me.*

"And I'm the Dragonslayer's daughter, but look where that got me," she retorted, a slight smirk on her face. *W-wait, the Dragonslayer has a-?* "Just be careful. Even if he's your father, it wouldn't hurt to try."

"Fine, but only because you're insisting on it," Undauntable huffed, though he found himself not minding Ivy's advice as much as he thought he would. *I don't know if she's speaking from personal experience or what, but...I guess she's not wrong.* He gave her one last nod before heading out the door, a sigh of relief escaping his lips once it was fully shut.

*If I'm going to try and get them out of here, then I can't be careless about this. Father won't stand for it if he finds out.*

...

**a/n: alright, so...yeah, this was another one of those chapters that i had everything in mind for already, just that motivation came and went throughout the month. hopefully it came out well? again, most characters in the Indestructible City are ones i haven't written as much before so it might take a while for me to get more used to writing them. Snakeroot and Duckweed are in fact OCs of mine, though**

**in any case the next pov is likely going to be Rowan's - regardless of who's the next pov chapter 30's going to be the last chapter for part two, which means that this fic will be either 2/3 done or 2/4 done (it mainly just depends on how many chapters i'll need to get to where i want for this fic's ending)**